

***RAYMOND
AND THE
SPACE
PIRATES***

BY FREDERICK L. KING

New Universe Sci Fi Publications

Copyright © 2018 by Frederick L. King

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN-13: 978-1985245716

New Universe Sci Fi Publications

2815 York Ave. #3

Cleveland, OH 44113

Please visit **www.rickkingonline.com**.

Printed in the United States of America

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data

King, Frederick L. /The Space Force Chronicles

***PART ONE:
THE SOVEREIGN
OF THE SKY***

ONE

Dear Benjamin and Ronald,

I bet you didn't think you'd ever hear from me again. It's your Cousin Ray. I am communicating with you to tell you of my adventures while we were moving from Luna to the Jovian moon Europa. I have had one wild adventure involving some real live space pirates! But let me start at the beginning...

The ship was really big! It is called the *Sovereign of the Sky* and it had just about everything you could imagine on board. I loved the I.A.V.R. (Immersive Augmented Virtual Reality) units on board. I was playing the part of an old time pirate captain with my own ship and everything! Becky even got sea sick! It was very different from the pirates of today, who prey on the merchant ships and other private vessels out here in space, especially in the Jupiter system. Dad told me that we were safe though, since the *Sovereign* is a passenger space-liner and it's so large and there are so many people on board. No pirate would ever dare attack us! Boy was he wrong!

We left from Luna on June 12. It was pretty cool to leave Armstrong City and go to Shepard Station in orbit. Remember the last time you guys were on Luna and we talked about how cool it would be to visit there? Well it was way cool!

It was big and a little disorienting considering how most of the station did not use gravplates like more modern stations and spacecraft do now days. It was just like a giant wheel, spinning slowly in space. On the habitat levels, we walked on the inside of the outer wall, with our

heads toward the center of the wheel. In the center was the docking structure.

It felt funny because the floor in the main passageways kept going up, but you never reached the end. On level A, there were skylights in the ceiling where you could see clear across to the other side of the station. It seemed as if the people on the opposite side of the station were walking on the ceiling. If you looked out the side windows, you could see the surface of the moon. It looked like it was slowly going around in circles while we, on board the space station seemed to be standing still! On the opposite side of the station, you know the side facing towards the Earth; the same effect was also experienced- only this time it was the Earth that was slowly spinning around in a wide circle.

All in all though, it was fun to see all of the people going to and fro from the colonies and stations around Mars, Jupiter and the Belt to the Earth-Luna system. There was even one ship that had come from Titian, you know, one of the moons of Saturn. Most of the travelers though, were headed to the Jupiter system, just like us.

Sovereign of the Sky was docked on the lower (moon side) platform of the station. As we approached the passenger's docking port, I was a little scared at just how big she truly was. (For some reason ships, especially large ships are always called *she*. I don't know why it couldn't be called a *he*.) We could see her through the glass enclosed concourse. The robot carrier followed us right up to the boarding gate where there was a long line. Becky and I sat in an opened space among our luggage while mom and dad stood in the line. Needless to say it was really boring. That is, until a man walked up to us.

"Excuse me, Commander Rodriguez?" the man said. He wore the official uniform of the employees on the mighty spaceship.

"Yes" dad replied.

"I am your personal steward sir. My name is Craig Porter and I

have been instructed to bring you and your family directly on board the ship. Your suite is waiting for you.” Craig said as he held out his arm and indicated which way we were to go. All eyes were on us as we followed him through a side door marked “Do Not Enter- VIPs only”. My dad explained because of his new assignment as Clarke Station’s second in command, he was considered a VIP (Very Important Person). I guess it is good to have a father who is very important, since it saved all of us from standing in that long line!

Ahead of us in our considerably shorter line were a group of dignitaries and Governors from each of the colonies of Jupiter, the Asteroid Belt and Saturn’s Titan. They were returning from an important conference on Earth where the fate of the entire United Solar Alliance would be evaluated and planed for the next five years.

My dad told me that Craig was primarily going to be looking out for Becky and me. In other words, he was to be our babysitter! Can you guys believe that? I am all of fourteen and Becky is eleven years old and we are stuck with a babysitter!

To make things worse, Craig was also our tutor. Unlike you guys in Cleveland, we are stuck with school all year long with only three weeks between each semester to chill out. It’s not fair! After all, we were space heroes, off to the Jupiter system in search of high adventure! Boy did that come true!

After a brief stop at customs, we were escorted onto the gangway that led to the main receiving area of the ship. Our luggage was taken directly to our suite and then unpacked for us as we enjoyed a delicious lunch at one of the ships many restaurants. By the time we got to our rooms, the only thing left untouched was our personal suitcases which were marked “personal”. All of the rest of our belongings had been shipped weeks ago on a freighter bound for our new home on Europa.

In all, we have a total of five rooms in our suite, including the

bathroom. As one walked into our quarters, immediately in front of you is a large pane of glass which allowed us to see what was happening outside the ship. To the left is the door leading to the master bedroom. On the right is a small kitchenette with a small walkway leading to two smaller bedrooms, obviously one is mine and the other is Becky's. Each of the bedrooms has a window.

The main room is by far the largest with the largest window. It has a large old -fashioned computer screen complete with a keyboard pad recessed into the coffee table in front of the couch. There also is a more modern holo-monitor that featured a conventional verbal interface. The A.I. is named Bob and its voice has a distinct electronic tone, a feature the designer implemented to keep the computer from sounding too human I guess. We also have our own wrist computers of course, which could connect to Bob. In fact, I am using mine right now to speak to you.

It barley registered with me that we had left the station two hours later. I felt no engine vibrations or inertia effects as the spaceship accelerated on its course to Jupiter. My father pointed Jupiter out to me through the large window in our quarters. It seemed that we were headed away from it at an angle, but he said that it only looks like that. In reality we are traveling towards Jupiter following a course that will allow us to reach the Jovian System in only nine E-weeks (that's Earth weeks).

There is something like one thousand passengers onboard the *Sovereign of the Sky*. Nearly half of them will be living or visiting Europa Station. The rest will be going on to one of the other domes on Europa or to one of the other dozens of worlds that orbit Jupiter.

We were navigating through the asteroid belt. It's kinda cool to look out the windows in our suite and actually have something to see. Most of the time there is nothing but the darkness of space. As we were crossing the orbit of Mars, I thought for a moment that we would get to

see the planet, but as my mother informed me, it was on the other side of the solar system at the moment. Oh well...

We had settled down to a pretty standard routine. In the mornings, Becky and I have our studies with Craig. He is not a bad teacher as teachers go. He seems to really know his subject material and has a talent for making us understand the various concepts, especially in math. He doesn't let us slack off either. But there is a part of him that is also mysterious. I don't know what it is, but I had a bad feeling about him.

In the afternoon, we have some free time. There are many different amusement centers onboard. Some of them show holofilms, while others are set up for virtual tag games or role playing like the one about pirates. There are even museums and libraries and my favorite, art galleries. Just about anything you could possibly want to do can be found here. Mom says that some people take these trips just for fun- like a vacation. But of course those people are pretty wealthy. Most of the passengers are like us- just traveling to get somewhere.

Mom and dad have meetings that they attend during the day mostly with other Space Force officers onboard. My father, being the incoming First Officer on Clarke Station was kept quite busy. Normally, we would have traveled on a military transport ship, but none would be available for a few months and Space Force HQ wanted him on Europa ASAP. I guess that they also felt my father and his family deserved a vacation, which was fine by me.

The food of course is great! Though we have a basic kitchenette in our suite, Becky and I prefer to eat at one of the many restaurants or fast food spots onboard. We had a McD's, Ken's and Burger King on the Strip. Mostly we ate at McD's every day for lunch. Mom and dad of course like the other more fancy restaurants where they served steaks and lobster and such and had live shows. Dinner was always served at 1800 hours every night in our suite if we weren't going out. My mother

insisted that we share this one meal together. Some evening's Craig will eat with us. But sometimes he would eat by himself.

At least twice a week we would all get together after dinner for a family activity, like we did tonight. We watched a Cleveland Indians baseball game broadcast almost live from Earth! Though it was delayed by a few hours we still had a great time at the holo center. At least a couple hundred folks were there. The way the theater is set up, it felt like we were actually there at the ballpark, sitting in our own section! Ron you would've loved it! We won 6 to 3 against the Detroit Tigers. The Indians are my favorite team; that is, after the Luna Legends. Of course they are in a different league since the gravity on the moon is somewhat less than on the Earth, even with gravplates.

At 0530 I was awoken out of a sound sleep by a noise. Not just a noise, but a very LOUD noise. I went out into the main room of our quarters to investigate. But nothing looked to be out of place. Becky, who also heard the noise, joined me a moment later. We knocked on our parents closed door, and received no answer.

“Maybe they are still sleep.” Becky said.

“Are you kidding?” I replied. “We’re talking about dad here. He wakes up if a pin falls to the floor.” It’s true; our father is a very light sleeper. I think it’s from being in the military. Mom on the other hand could sleep through a thermal nuclear explosion.

We opened the door and discovered that the room was empty. In fact, the bed didn’t look like it had even been slept in.

“Bob?” I said to the computer, “Where are our parents?”

The computer instantly lit up its interface. “Good morning Master Raymond. To answer your question, I do not know.”

“Where is Craig?” Becky asked.

“I am afraid I do not have an answer for you either, Ms. Rebecca.” The computer said.

“What time did they go to sleep last night?”

“I am afraid I do not know, Raymond. Would you like for me to start your morning shower now?” The computer said in its non-emotional tone of voice.

Suddenly a cold chill ran down my spine and Becky’s hand gripped my arm.

“No thank you Bob. Can you at least tell us what that noise was that we heard?”

“There is a pair of maintenance workers working on a conduit not far from these quarters on the next deck. Perhaps you heard a noise that was transmitted through the conduit?” the computer replied.

Becky and I looked at each other. Not sure of what it was, we both felt that something was amiss. For one thing our folks wouldn’t just up and leave without telling us. And second, that would not explain Craig’s disappearance. No- something was up and we needed to find out what.

“Becky, go and get changed.” I said as I started for my room. I changed into the clothes that I wore last night at the ball game, and then came out into the front room again. A few minutes later Becky came out from her room. After a brief stop to use the bathroom for each of us, we went out into the corridor and checked Craig’s room.

As we expected, we found no response to our knocks at his door. In fact, for the next half an hour we did not see anyone at all. It was very eerie. I even tried to call the bridge and the other stewards and staff. No one responded to our calls. Becky thought of the idea to check the strip. McD’s and all of the other stores were empty also.

Eventually we ran into Sammy, Amie, Joseph, and Tammy and a good two dozen other kids who like us, had been wandering about the ship, at least the parts that was accessible to us. We were all teenagers between 10 and 15 years old and there were no adults in sight. We all gathered at McD’s to compare our stories.

“Did you guys see any adults?” Amie asked.

No one had seen anyone.

“What could have happened to them?” Joseph asked. “It is not like everyone could have just jumped overboard or something... I mean we are in space traveling at a gazillion kilometer’s a second! They have got to be on the ship somewhere.”

“Or at least their bodies!” Sammy chimed in.

At that, Tammy and Becky started to cry.

Amie comforted the girls even while scolding Sammy. "Shame on you Sammy! There is no need to start talking like that!" Amie was among the oldest at 15.

"She is right," I said. "They must still be onboard. Did anyone try the crew decks?" If I hadn't said this before, I will tell you now. There are certain decks of this nearly kilometer long ship that passengers are not allowed. Those are the crew decks. They contained things like the engine room, cargo and storage rooms and the bridge. The crew quarters were of course located on the crew decks as well.

Jacob, a boy who was twelve years old said that he tried to get to one of the other decks but found the hatch was locked. A couple of other nodded in agreement; they too had found the doors locked. Normally those doors were never locked; in fact- some did not even have locks on them.

Kids kept finding their way to the Strip. By this time there were somewhere around 200, all of us sitting on the artificial grass that ran the length of the Strip. Above our heads was a glass roof though which we can see the stars and anything else outside the ship.

Sara, a small girl of about ten raised her hand.

"Yes," I said to her.

In a barely audible voice the shy little girl said "I lost Mommy and Daddy and my little sisters, Kelly and Dawn." I could tell that she had been crying. One of the other older girls put her arm around her as the tear factory began to warm up again.

"You mean that it's not just the grownups that are missing?" I asked the crowd.

A few heads nodded.

"Yeah," some kid said from in back. "It seems that only the kids who are under nine or ten are missing along with the adults!"

Because Becky was almost eleven and was obviously not taken, I hadn't noticed. This was certainly another layer to the mystery. I can't

think of reason why only the young teenagers would be left by themselves. All of us were scared and hungry.

“Hey guys,” I said looking at the clock suspended from the glass ceiling. It said 0920. “Why don’t we all go over to Ken’s Cafeteria? I think it would be able to seat all of us and better still, there is a cereal bar there so we can have breakfast and think about what we are gonna do.”

After we all ate some cereal, we talked more about the situation.

“I recommend that we just sit here and wait for them to come back!” Tommy said.

“And if they don’t?” Sonja shot back.

“Well what are we supposed to do? We’re just kids!”

“Well I’m not just gonna sit here and wait! I am gonna go and find my momma! She is all that I have and I am not gonna lose her!” Sonja’s angry voice boomed throughout the room as she stood up.

“Wait a minute!” I said trying to keep the peace. “We don’t know what is happening and we are not going to jump to conclusions!”

Sara, who had been sitting near me and Becky while we ate, tugged at my sleeve.

“Yes Sara?”

“I think they are on another deck.” She whispered into my ear.

“And why is that?”

“Because I saw a bunch of people going down the stairs near my quarter’s last night.” the little girl said.

“Why didn’t you say something before?” I asked her.

She whispered to me, “I sleepwalk. Last night I was just waking up and I was in the corridor outside and looked and saw them, marching to a stairwell! Honest! But I thought it might have been a dream so I went back inside and got back in to bed.”

“Did anyone else see anything strange last night?”

David put his hand up, “I thought I heard someone talking

about shooting someone if they resisted as they went past my door. I thought they were talking about a I.A.V.R. game. I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"Well we ain't gonna find out anything sitting here. Let's go and break down the doors to the crew decks, maybe we can even find the bridge. I am sure we will get some answers there." Bill said.

"HOLD IT!" Both Amie and I said together, our voices almost lost in the choruses of "Yeah!" and "Let's Do It!"

"We aren't all gonna go barging down to the crew decks like a pack of wild animals! It makes better sense for us to send a small team to do this-maybe two teams." I said.

I guess Amie was on the same wave length as I was because she said, "I think that we should divide up into two groups of four. One tries to get to the bridge in the bow of the ship, the other head towards engineering near the stern. And we should keep in contact."

"How are we gonna keep in contact? Does anyone have a pair of walkie-talkies?" someone asked.

"We have our wrist computers." I said.

So we broke up into two groups. I led the first group headed for the bridge and Amie headed the other. But first we had to find an axe or a hammer or something to help us get through the steel doors that bar our way.

THREE

My team included a boy named Mike, a big muscle bound athletic type of kid of mixed Asian and African American descent. I chose Mike because of his obvious strength. He was like me-fourteen years old. As it turns out, he was a poet, or at least an aspiring one. At nearly five foot ten, he towered over the rest of us.

Sara was only there because she had held on to my arm so hard that I thought it would fall off. As it turns out, the shy little girl was the oldest of three. Her sisters were twins and they were only four years old. Sara had some mental problems that made her very introverted, and for some reason she had chosen to latch on to me.

Becky was there because... well she is my sister. I don't think that she would forgive me if we were separated now.

The other team was led by Amie. Sonja was on her team as was Jim and Tommy. They were to go towards engineering. We all checked our wrist computers and sent messages to one another in order to test them out. We decided that only Amie and I would use the *WI.COM.S* as we called the little computers that we wore on our forearms. Just a little larger than an old fashioned wrist watch, the *wrist computer* can be used to access the Enhanced Info Net (or *EIN*), or as a communication device, or we can play games on them.

We got through the door after about an hour. Before us was a stairwell that led to the crew decks. The first deck we came to seemed to be deserted just like our deck. The next deck though, was not.

Upon entering, the first thing we noticed was the smell of food coming from a galley somewhere.

"I know you guys smell that!:" Mike said.

“Yeah I am getting hungry again.” I replied.

Glancing at the clock on my wicom I saw that it read 1240.
Almost lunch time.

We silently crept along the darkened corridor towards the smell. Faintly we could hear the sound of someone cooking in the kitchen. From somewhere else, we heard voices talking. From our vantage point, it sounded like mumbling, but as we got closer, the sound began to separate into distinctive words and then full sentences.

“Why are we going through so much trouble just to keep them alive when we are going to kill them anyway?” said voice number one.

“I don’t know but I am certainly not going to go against her orders.” Replied voice number two.

“If you ask me, I say we should just open up the airlocks and be done with them.”

“Yeah well I don’t know about you but I am not too keen on spacing nearly two thousand people. I’d feel like that dude back at the turn of last century who blew up that building with all those people in it.” said voice number two. “I just couldn’t live with myself. You know what I mean?”

“I’m not too keen on it either but ...Did you hear something?”

At the mention of the word “kill” Sara had let out a gasp.
Instantly my hand went to cover her mouth. We were hidden behind a tray server bot that had been left in the hallway. We all held our breaths.

“Naw...It is probably Old Eddie in the galley scratching his bald head!” the other voice said. “Come on. Let’s go down to the mess to grab some grub before we feed those people.”

We slowly let out our breath and thanked our gods as the men walked down the corridor in the opposite direction.

I put my head up for a second and saw that the two men were carrying weapons. That could only mean one thing; pirates!

“That was close.” Becky whispered.

“Yeah, real close.” Mike agreed.

“I think we should find a place somewhere and call Amie. Let her know what we have found out.” I said.

“Yeah I agree. Let’s not talk here.” Mike said.

The four of us quietly made our way down an opposite passage to an abandoned crew quarters. We were all scared at that point.

I fumbled with the wicom and finally managed to establish a link to Amie.

“Amie, have you guys run into anything yet?”

“Not yet, in fact we haven’t seen anyone.” She replied.

“I think that they are being held as hostages. We have seen some men carrying weapons and talking about spacing them!” I told her.

“You what?” she said.

I related the whole story to her and our close call. When I finished, she was in utter shock.

“Pirates!” she said in disbelief. “Why would they want to attack a ship as big as the *Sovereign of the Sky*? And why separate us from the rest of the population? And where are they holding everyone?”

“I don’t know but we better watch ourselves. I feel that these people will not hesitate to kill us if they discover us in these sections.”

“There are only a few places large enough to hold that many people.” Mike said. “One would be on our deck in the Strip.”

“Well we know that they aren’t there.” Becky said.

“What about a cargo bay?” asked Sonja through my wicom.

“Yeah, that might be the case.” Amie said.

My team all looked at each other and somehow we all knew that that was the case.

“So where is the cargo bay?” Becky asked.

Tom said, “Maybe we can pull up a map on the wicom. I think I heard someone mention that there are two bays.”

We spent the next fifteen minutes trying to find one on the EIN but were not able to find one detailed enough. Both teams had to scout out the areas where they were most likely to be located and eventually we found them. Sure enough, all of our missing people were there.

At one point Jim, who was on Amie's team, was almost caught. One of the pirates had spotted him at the far end of a long corridor while they were searching for the cargo hold. But because of the distance and the dim lighting, he was able to pretend that he was one of the pirates. The real pirate did not bother to investigate any farther.

We headed back to the main group. I was not sure of what to do next. We were only kids, for goodness sakes! How do we defeat well-armed pirates?

FOUR

As we made our way back to the passenger deck, we were captured. We weren't hurt or anything, though Mike got bruised from his effort to fight off the pirates that captured us. It seems that Becky has a new hero in Mike. Just like the way Sara has latched on to me, so Becky has latched on to Mike. Go figure.

Anyway, as I was saying, we were caught as we were returning to the group. I guess everyone else were rounded up while we were gone and placed in the holo theater where the night before we attended the baseball game. As the two large men "escorted" us to the theater, I hid my wicom in my underwear. Boy, am I glad that I changed them that morning! Unfortunately they confiscated the one Becky had and Sara and Mike didn't have one to begin with. Sara gave me a "look" when they didn't find my wicom.

When we entered the theater, I immediately noticed that Amie and her crew were already there. She must have gotten caught right after I had last spoken to her. A woman was standing, larger than life, over the captive audience. It was a holo image, but her presence was defiantly felt. She appeared to be physically fit, wearing a dark leather one piece body suit. Her hair was dark and pinned back into a small bun in back of her head. She had a hard look to her, like life had not been very kind.

"Now that we are all here," the giant woman said as she looked in my direction while I was taking a seat, "We can get started. First and foremost, you are all now considered to be the property of Captain Tobias Jones. –Yes- Blackbeard."

We all gasped as she said his name. Everyone in the solar

system knew THAT name. Captain Jones was the embodiment of the new breed of pirates, people who preyed upon innocent travelers, commandeering their ships and cargo, raping and killing both men and women who dared to work and live in the Jupiter system. Captain Jones is the leader of them all, having a reputation as a particularly blood thirsty scoundrel, just like his counterpart in the 17th century. He fancies himself a modern-day Blackbeard, though he has no beard as far as anyone knows.

“My name is Mistress Blackwater and I am in charge of you and this whole operation.” She continued. “You may consider your past lives gone. Your brothers and sisters who have not been chosen are now dead. Your parents are dead. You however- are alive and you will remain so as long as you do what we tell you and as soon as we tell you to do it.” There was not one bit of maternal concern in her voice. No joy in her face. She was just as cold-blooded as Captain Jones. Her image looked down upon us as if she was standing there in the flesh, inspecting her latest acquisitions.

Many of the kids in the large room had tears in their eyes. Even Mike was crying, though I won’t ever mention it to his face. But for me, tears did not come. I knew that our people were still alive. I had just seen them in the cargo bay! However, I was not in a position to say so at that moment.

The giant hologram went on: “You are all to become our slaves and work in our ship factories, building our ships and renovating our “trophies”. If you work hard and do what you are told, we will feed you and give you a place to sleep. Those who do very well may even earn a place among us. If you decide to not do your best, well I have men who are experts at physical punishments and other forms of motivation. Disobedience will not be tolerated.”

FIVE

Our captors broke us up into small groups of roughly ten or twelve of us per group. Sonja was in my group along with Becky, Mike, Amie and Sara, and a few others. We were taken to a small traditional theater intended for amateur productions and recitals and such, where we were told to stay put. The guards left us there, locking the doors as he went.

“I am scared; I don’t want to be here!” Sonja had tears in her eyes since the announcement of our parent’s death was made. Up until now I hadn’t had a chance to tell them what I saw.

“Sonja, the woman on the hologram was lying. I saw them, the grownups I mean. I saw them in the big cargo hold on deck seven; At least some of them.” The look in her eyes told me that she was not sure if I was telling her the truth. She looked as if she has had too many disappointments in her young life already.

“Look, I wouldn’t lie to you.” I said gently. “I don’t know who your mother is, but I am almost positive that they haven’t killed anyone yet.”

“I am sorry, I shouldn’t be crying like this.” Sonja wiped her tears with the sleeve of her shirt. “It’s just that my mom and I haven’t been real close until my dad died three years ago. My father was my whole life! He was a crewman onboard a freighter that was attacked by some pirates. He had wanted my mom and me to come to Europa to be with him, since he seemed to be there more than he was at home. After he died, I lost it and had a real hard time, you know- getting into trouble, trying drugs, having sex and in general just screwing up my life. Anyway after the last time in juvie, I had to get myself together.

Through a lot of hard work and my mom's help, I did it. We are now on our way to Europa just like my dad had wanted, and I am starting a new life there- my mom and I that is. She even has a new boyfriend who seems to be a good guy. If anything ever happens to her..."

I found myself putting my arm around her. Under different circumstances I might even had been enjoying the intimacy we shared there in the middle of that small theater with ten other people.

"Ok you two lovebirds- break it up over there!" Mike said with a slight grin on his face. I guess I was slightly blushing as I took my arm from around her. I noticed that Sara was giving me an "I hate you" look from across the aisle. *What was the dirty look for? Could Sara have had a crush on me? Naw! She is only a kid!* I told myself.

Over the next few hours, we all just sat and speculated about what we should do. Mike wanted to break the lock and escape. Sonja felt the same way. Amie wanted to try and find another way out, like through an access port or some vent shaft. I also was in favor of this approach. It seemed unfortunately that we were in the minority. Amie and I and Sara listened as the rest made plans to rush the guard outside.

"Look," I told them, "We are all just teenagers here. We have no weapons. They have guns and know how to use them."

"I know guns!" Jim said.

"Oh? Do you happen to have one on you right now?"

"No." he replied.

"Well I guess it is a whole lot of help to us right now." I said. To the group I said, "The point is this: If we all go rushing the guard outside the door; someone will probably get hurt- possibly even killed. We aren't in the military nor have we any training for this. Amie is right. Why not just try and find another way out of here, one where we all might be safer?"

"But there is only one guard." Mike said.

"That you know of." Amie shot back. "Who's to say that there

isn't another one somewhere? No, Raymond is right."

"I am willing to risk it!" Mike stood up. "Who is with me?"

Most of the kids raised their hands.

"You're making a mistake!" I said, but Mike and the other kids had already started to talk about what they were gonna do. Sara, Amie, Becky, and I sat outside of the perimeter of their conversation.

Mike stood in front of the door, breathing hard with his eyes closed. The rest of the kids stood behind him, ready to rush out the door once Mike had broken the door lock. After taking a few deep breaths like a Martial Art Master, he slowly raised one foot in the air with the knee bent.

At that precise moment, the door opened and a guard appeared with a serving cart, ready to serve us our dinner. The other guard, whose weapon had already been drawn, stood to the side. They just looked at Mike and the rest of us. We looked back at them.

For a moment, both sides were motionless, shocked by seeing the other. Then, like a light switch being turned on, everyone was suddenly in motion. Most went towards the door to overtake the guards. Mike kicked the lead guard since his foot was already in position to do so. Then the other guard's weapon fired. A plasma bolt flashed for a split second, followed by a loud scream and the smell of burnt flesh.

The whole room froze again for the second time in five seconds. At first I was afraid that it was me, because the bolt flew past my shoulder, under my arm. I felt the heat as it singed my shirt. But then I looked behind me.

Lying on the floor with a smoking hole in her chest was Sara. We all just stared at her. None of us had ever seen death before.

Ben, Ronald...I hope you never have to smell that particular odor. I hope you never have to look upon the dead body...of someone who just moments ago you were talking too. The smell and the sight will haunt you for the rest of your life.

The arrival of other guards sent us back into the room. We were all defeated even Mike, who was fighting to hold back his tears. I didn't even hear when the new guards had yelled at us. He said something about how we had killed the little girl. His familiar voice was saying that we were responsible and that the next time we will be whipped and isolated if we try anything else. He went on about how we had cost the Organization money in that they now had one less slave for the factory.

It wasn't until they had left and removed the body that Becky pulled me to the side and whispered, "Did you see who that man was?"

"No." I said not really caring.

"It was Craig!"

"Craig who?"

"Craig Porter!" she said.

"What?"

"He was a pirate all along!"

"I wonder how many other members of the crew are also pirates." I said to no one particular.

Hours later, as we tried to sleep, our bellies were feeling the effect of being deprived of food. I laid on the small stage and starred up towards the ceiling. I noticed a small door high up on one of the walls on stage about nine meters off the stage floor and hidden by the curtains. I moved over to where Amie was sitting.

"You see that door on the stage?" I said to her.

"What door?" she asked.

"That one behind the curtain over there." I said pointing.

She looked and finally saw what I was talking about. We both stood and walked over to it, looking up.

"Where do you think it leads to?" she asked.

"I don't know but I think we should find out." I responded, suddenly feeling some hope for our situation. Amie grabbed the curtain rope and began to climb it.

“I will be back in a few,” she said as she climbed.

In a few minutes she returned and told us that it led to a small passageway that let out on to another corridor on the deck above us.

It took almost twenty minutes to get everyone up and through that door. A couple of people had problems, chief among them was Mike. It seemed that despite his tough guy exterior, he really was afraid of heights. Though he was the biggest of us all, getting him to climb that rope was one of the hardest jobs I had ever done. In the end though, we all got through the door and through the corridor to an empty VIP suite, similar in layout as ours.

“I wonder how long it will take for them to notice we are not there.” Becky asked.

“I don’t know but I would love to see the look on their faces!” someone said.

As we made our selves some sandwiches and then relaxed in the front room, we talked about almost everything except what had happened to Sara. No one really wanted to come to terms with the fact that one of our very own had been killed. It was a reality no one wanted to address.

SIX

Overnight, there were no major problems and no close calls. BOB had been disconnected from the ship's computer network for fear that he would give our location away to the pirates. We discussed over a breakfast of toast and peanut butter sandwiches what our next move should be.

"I think we should just sit here and wait for Space Force to rescue us." Becky said. "Here we have food and water plus we are away from the pirates."

"What about our parents?" Sonja asked.

"My dad is in Space Force and I know he is working on a way to get free and to come and rescue us." Becky replied. "Tell her Raymond!"

"Sis, he is a prisoner just like all the other grownups. In fact just like us!" I said. We really were still prisoners of the pirates since we aren't free to move around the ship. "But you are right about him cooking up a plan. Knowing our father he probably has something up his sleeve."

"Well we can't just stay here. Sooner or later we will be discovered." Mike added.

I said, "Okay, let's see what we know already. The mastermind behind this situation is Captain Tobias Jones A.K.A. Blackbeard. He has Mistress Blackwater in charge of this particular operation of theirs."

"We also know that Craig Porter is one of them!" Becky chimed in.

Amie said, "We also know that they want to use us as slaves. They want us to work in their shipyard somewhere."

"Our parents and the crew are being held in the three cargo

bays. Each one holding about five hundred people if they divided the passengers up equally. The crew and Space Force people are in one while the rest are divided between the other two.” I said. “Do we have any idea of how many pirates there are?”

“I don’t know, but my guess would be somewhere around two hundred.” Amie said. “Listen, I think one of us has got to slip out of here and find out what is going on.”

“Yea, but let’s not do it like last time.” I told her. “At most I think only two of us should go. The rest should stay here.”

“Okay, but who will go?” Mike asked.

“I am going” I said. “I also think that either Amie or Mike should go.”

“What about me?” Jim, the boy who had said that he knew guns whined. “I want to go!”

I knew that his heart was in the right place, but being only eleven years old, and a bit immature, I knew that he would not be able to do what was required. Still, I didn’t want to dampen his spirit.

I said, “You know Jim, we can’t leave everyone else here defenseless. I need you to stay and guard everyone here. Can you do that?”

“Of course I can Ray!” Jim said, his face smiling ear to ear.

I looked at Amie, who knew that she and Sonja were the ones who would be staying to look after the others. She acknowledged my unspoken decision with a slight nod. Mike and I went to the kitchen area to grab a sandwich for later.

“I will head to the bridge,” I said. “I want you to see how well they are guarding the cargo bays. Maybe you can think of a strategy to rescue the prisoners. We’ll keep in touch via the wi.com.”

“I don’t have one.” Mike said.

“Amie! Can you let Mike use your wi.com?”

“They took mine when they caught us and took us to the

holotheater.” she said.

“Well I guess there goes that idea.” I said. “Let’s just plan to be back here in an hour.”

We left the suite feeling like characters from a spy holofilm. The only difference being that this was real life. We already had seen the results of making mistakes first hand. One wrong move and we could die.

Anyway, I made it to the deck containing the bridge. I made my way to one of the access panels leading to the bridge’s ventilation system. I gazed out through a ventilation panel, and saw Mistress Blackwater sitting in what obviously was the captain’s chair. In addition to her, I saw three other people at duty stations.

I could see that we were no longer in the asteroid belt. In fact, we were almost to Jupiter. It looked like a giant multicolored ball hanging out there directly in front of us. It’s famous red spot peering at us like a giant eyeball. It looked both ferocious and beautiful at the same time. As I looked at it, it seemed to grow still larger.

“Poppa,” I heard Mistress Blackwater say, “We should reach the base in about five hours.”

“Very well dear, I look forward to seeing you soon.” It was Blackbeard himself! “Did you have any problems with the new slaves?”

“Not exactly,” she said. “A small group is still loose onboard the ship somewhere, but we shall find them.” she said.

“I know you will. So how many did we get this time?” Tobias Jones asked.

“In total there are one hundred and eighty seven. It was one hundred and eighty eight, but a guard killed one of the brats. Craig Porter, one of our prior recruits took care of him though.”

“What about the parents?” he asked.

“We’ve kept them alive for now. I figure some of them might be useful to us...”

“You were told to space them. The passenger list had a number of Space Force Officers on it, not to mention the ships own security personnel that we couldn’t turn and those leaders from that Alliance conference. I need the children and those political people brought to us, and the rest killed!” Jones’s voice was sounding angrier by the moment.

“Now Poppa, I know what you said. But you also told me that this was my operation. I could run it the way I saw fit. I am keeping them for leverage.” She answered.

“You need to do as you are told!” Blackbeard said to his daughter. “Don’t forget what happened to your mother when she disobeyed me. I don’t care if you are my little girl, I will still whip you to death as well.”

She reminded me of a young girl who had just been reprimanded by her parents. Of course *her* family has a lot of issues. At least she is carrying on the family business.

Jupiter now filled half of the view port. The eye of the great storm was almost dead ahead. I saw no sign of a moon or space station nearby. In five hours we will be inside the Great Storm. In five hours I am afraid, we will also be dead.

SEVEN

I went back to the suite by another route other than the one I left by. I guess that they were doing a room by room search for us. As I entered the suite, the lights were off and everything was very quiet. At first I thought that I had entered the wrong room by accident or that the pirates had found the others and taken them.

My fear was laid to rest when Becky shouted, "Raymond!"

I turned and found her emerging from one of the closets in the room to the right.

"Shhhh!" I said to her and the others who was beginning to come out of hiding. "The pirates are not far away!" I said in a hushed tone. I quickly explained what I heard on the bridge.

"She's his daughter?" Amie could not believe it.

"It figures." said Sonja. "She is just as bloodthirsty as her father."

"Mike hasn't made it back yet?" I asked. "It has been almost two hours now."

"No he hasn't. I am worried for him. What if they have captured him?" Becky said.

I started to tell her that I was sure that he was alright when we suddenly heard a noise at the door. We all crowded into the bedroom that they had hid in just minutes earlier and closed the door. We all tried desperately to be as silent as a blank wall. In the dark we were on our knees and I for one, prayed to become invisible. I thought I would crap on myself when the door to the room opened. Instead, I only let out a loud fart. That started the other kids to giggling despite our lives being at risk.

“Man does it stink in here!” Mike said grinning ear from ear.

I don’t mind telling you that I was really relieved to hear his voice. He quickly filled us in on what his excursion had uncovered. It seemed that there were three groups of hostages. The military, security and ship’s personnel were located in the forward cargo hold while the others were in the larger holds towards the rear. Mike didn’t think that it would be possible to rescue them all and the other kids still on the Strip at the same time.

He also confirmed that the pirates were getting closer. He had had a close call while he was out and discovered a small trap door behind the bed in a bedroom, a door that led to the adjoining suites. It was originally designed to be a fire escape route, but only by reading the small plaque that is located in each suite would one even know about it. We were glad that Mike had read it.

“But where would we go?” Sonja asked.

“They are all over the place!”

“I noticed a few storage rooms on the next deck that look like a good place to hide.” Mike said.

“No,” I said, “If we get trapped in there we will have no place to escape. I doubt that they would have a secret fire escape door in them.”

“Why don’t we stay here?” Kim said. Kim was a small quiet girl with long blonde hair. Before now, she had not said a word to anyone, even before the pirate attack. “Here we can talk freely and, if we can dodge the guards that are sure to check this room, we can eat and sleep and plan for getting our parents back. All we would have to do is keep our voices and noise low so we don’t draw attention to ourselves.” She said.

We all looked at one another in the darkness of the room. The light reflecting from the planet Jupiter was the only thing that lit the spartan bedroom.

The decision was made for us. The door in the main room

opened. We pressed the button on the side of the bed and the bed moved over to the right; revealing a small passage way. Silently, one by one, we went through the opening into the bedroom of the adjoining suite, or so we thought.

Mike, the last to escape, pressed another button on the side of the bed as he went through and the bed moved back to its original position just as the door to the room opened.

We discovered that the walls were actually hollow and we all were able to stand in the narrow walkway between the two rooms. Without any lights, we could hear the guards walking around the room. Finding no one there, they left. I had not realized that I had been holding my breath. We exited the hiding place five minutes later. The intruders were gone. Given the sheer number of rooms they had to check, I doubted they would return.

In the next hour or so we hashed out a plan to rescue our parents, the rest of the kids and the crew. We felt that the best course of action would be to concentrate on the first hold, the one containing the military and ship's crew. Once they were freed, then they would rescue the others. After all, we are only kids.

Mike said that the hostages were free to walk around, however they all were wearing elasti-cuffs on both their wrists and ankles. The idea is that they allow some freedom of movement; however the cord between the two cuffs would contract when the button on its wireless controller was pressed, bringing the two cuffs together like conventional restraints, only these restraints can deliver a nasty electrical shock to the wearer also.

Mike informed us that the hold had obviously been emptied of much of its cargo to make room for the estimated four hundred prisoners it now held. He counted twenty five guards, each with controllers and plaser guns.

I should probably explain to you that a plaser gun uses both

plasma and a powerful laser to destroy its target. Commonly used in space platforms such as spaceships and space stations, the weapon emits a laser beam at its target. A fraction of a second later, a plasma bolt, energy that resembles lightning, travels the length of the laser to deliver a damaging electrical charge, utterly destroying its target. What is the advantage to using such a weapon onboard spaceships you ask? There is no kickback at all so it's easier to shoot. Also if you should hit the wall of the ship, the bolt would just dissipate over the whole of the ship reducing the chance of a hull breach. With a higher voltage version such as what is produced by an exterior mounted plasmer canon, one can overwhelm an enemy's defenses and cause catastrophic damage or even destroy the targeted vessel. This much larger and powerful version of the gun is used on warships in tandem with the ship's rail guns.

"We had better hurry if we are going to do something." I said.

"We have less than three hours before we reach the pirate base."

"How do you know that we only have three hours?" Jim asked.

I lost my temper, "I just do! Alright? I told you I overheard Blackwater talking with her dad! Look, we need to get those people out as soon as we can so they can do what they are trained to do! All of this sitting around and talking is not doing them a bit of good! The bad guys could space them at any moment!"

I really didn't mean to snap like I did. But the frustration I felt over the last twenty four hours was testing my limits. In the pale orange and red light that shone through the room's viewport, I could see fear in the eyes of the others. We all felt the fear of losing the people we loved the most. The cold reality of Sara's death played with our emotions and though unseen and unheard in our conversation, was ever present in our minds. For me, the added image of the giant planet on the bridge punctuated my thoughts.

In the next hour we formed a plan.

Carol and Luther, eleven year old twins, raced down the

corridor at top speed, drawing the two guards outside of the cargo bay away from us, allowing us to gain access to the hatch. I worried that they might get caught or worse that they might get shot, but the two insisted on doing their part. Being small and quick, the pair felt confident that they could out run the pirates who now were chasing them.

Mike and I made our way into the giant room. I was stunned by the number of prisoners in a room about the size of a small high school gym. The people were mostly sitting, with the few who looked like they were hurt being treated by a makeshift caregiver. In each of the four corners, half partitions were erected with signs posted on three of them that read MEN, and one corner labeled WOMEN. Each was attended too by a guard.

Both Mike and I carried a length of pipe each, roughly a meter long. I wasn't too worried about Mike being able to handle himself in a fight due to his self-reported juvenile offender record. He told me that he was here because he had gotten into trouble at his school. One too many fights I guess. Anyway, his mom decided to send him to Io so his father could take care of him. He was traveling alone. Who I was worried about, was me. I have never hurt anyone in my life. I was not sure that I could.

EIGHT

As we stood there trying to memorize where each of the guards were, the lights went out. That meant that Amie and Sonja had found the power grid for this section. With the lights out, we sprang into action. The room was pitch black for several seconds before the emergency lights kicked in. By then we were upon each of the corner guards on our side of the room.

Mike had no problem dispatching his guard with his pipe. I raised mine to do the same. The pirate looked into my eyes with total shock and surprise. He started to reach for his gun as I brought the pipe down on his head, his skull crushed beneath the blow. The pirate fell to the floor dead. I stood there staring at my victim and I felt myself shaking.

In the confusion that followed, the prisoners were all on their feet, rushing the guards on the far side of the bay. One of the prisoners grabbed my victim and took from him his controller for the elasti cuffs. He started releasing everyone. My dad came and put his arm around me and just held me.

“Son, sometimes you have to do things you don’t like doing. But sometimes you have to. You and your friends were very brave to come in here like this. But now you have to snap out of it. We are in a serious situation and I am gonna need you.” My father said. Then the lights came back on.

He then shouted for everyone’s attention. Being that he was the highest ranking military officer onboard, he felt he needed to take charge of the situation. The captain of the ship, Captain Bancroft, called his men to order as well. When all eyes were upon them and quiet, my

father spoke.

“Listen! Listen up everyone! We’ve got to form a strategy to take back this ship. Tobias Jones AKA Blackbeard is holding our families hostage still. So we must be careful till we can rescue them. You there!” he said pointing at an officer, “Get someone on those doors!” The officer grabbed four men and placed them near both doors with the now dead or dying guard’s plaser rifles. The seven hand plasers and two knives the guards were carrying were distributed several Space Force marines, experts in the use of the deadly weapons. Sonja and Amie joined us in the makeshift detention block. The four of us sat down with dad, the captain and a few of his men and brought them up to speed.

“Jupiter itself?” my father remarked after I finished explaining what I heard on the bridge. “It doesn’t seem possible. We always wondered how he was able to just disappear after looting a ship. How long do we have you say?”

“About an hour.” I told him.

“And you are sure that the ship was headed for the Red Spot?”

I nodded.

“We have got to move quickly, Blackwater is not stupid. They probably are on their way right now. First things first we rescue the other passengers in the main cargo bay; we’ll post our people there to protect them. Captain, can the doors be locked down and disabled from here? My fear is that they would open them while we were in here to space us.”

“Yes, Commander,” he said nodding at a control panel on the wall. “That unit there will disable the doors so the bridge won’t have control of it.”

“Good. Let’s get someone on that panel right now!”

“Aye, sir!” a life hardened middle aged man, the ship’s engineer I suppose, left to take care of the task.

On the far side of the bay, the sound of plaser fire was heard.

The men posted on the door returned fire as they locked the doors. On our side of the bay, a similar scene took place. A smoke grenade was launched into the room from the door, but someone was able to throw it back before it was able to release its poison into the air. My father was correct, they had discovered us.

The gun fight lasted for less than a minute. I couldn't see very much of it because my father and several other officers kept pushing us to the middle of the room to protect us. When it was over, he came back to us near the center of the room.

With his plaser still in his hand, he shot out the cameras that were in the ceiling, cameras that had allowed the pirates on the bridge to see into the cargo hold and monitor what we were doing.

"We must move fast before they try using the civilians in the other cargo bay or the children against us!" he said. "The majority of us will remain here. Lieutenant," he said pointing to a young man standing behind me, "you will lead a small team to find and release the colonial representatives and the other hostages."

"Ladies?" my dad asked Sonja and Amie, "Do you think you can get back to the suite where the rest of your friends are?"

"Yes."

"I want you to go there now. Tell them to be ready to move when I tell them. Mike, go with them."

"Yes sir!" Mike replied. "But what of the other kids? They are all scattered up and down the strip."

"We will do what we can," Dad replied. "Ray?"

"Yes Dad" I said.

"Come with me."

We walked briskly out of the room, stopping only to relieve a dead pirate of his weapon. He handed it to me.

"You know how to fire this?" he asked me.

In a split second, I relived the moments of Sara's death and I

was reminded of my feelings of helpless and regret at not being able to save her.

And now my father was handing me a gun, the very same tool that killed that little girl just hours before. I took the gun from him. I stared at it, seeing her face as a hole was ripped in to her chest. I smelled the odor of flesh being burned, seared like a steak on a barbecue grill.

“Yeah dad,” I said to him. “I know how to use it.”

He looked at me kind of strange. Maybe he knew that his fourteen year old son had lost his childhood delusion that life was forever. Maybe he thought that I just had an upset stomach.

We sneaked our way past several guards and we took down a guard, or should I say my father did. I was told to watch his six; slang for watching his back.

As we made our way through the endless maze of corridors, I noticed that the ship was entering the upper atmosphere of Jupiter. A barely visible layer of clouds now presented itself through the viewports that we passed on our way to the bridge.

I had told my father of my hiding place from where I could see the bridge earlier. We entered the same ventilation shaft and were presented with much the same scene as the last time I was here; though this time around the bridge was fully staffed by her men. Blackwater was in the captain’s chair, issuing orders to her people and Jupiter, the king of all the planets, was not in view.

Well actually, that’s not true. It was there, only now it was an endless sea of orangey red thick clouds, bubbling and boiling with all kinds of gasses. And in the far distance, was a ship! Or something man-made by the looks of it.

Whispering into my ear, my dad said, “I am going to go around to the other side of the bridge. When I give you the signal, come out shooting. You understand?”

I nodded. Then I asked, “What is the signal?”

He said, “You will know.”

And he disappeared into the ventilation shaft and out of sight.

NINE

The signal my father gave me from the other side of the bridge was gun fire. He had broken through the ventilation screen and started shooting at every pirate in sight. I did the same, following his example, a few seconds later.

We had caught everyone off guard and took six of them as our prisoners. The three pirates we had shot died on the spot.

A few minutes later, the real bridge officers from the crew arrived and helped us remove the pirates and had them escorted to the makeshift brig. There were about one hundred forty pirates total left alive.

As they were leaving, Captain Bancroft made his way onto the bridge. The *Sovereign of the Sky* was his ship again. My father abandoned the Captain's chair when he saw Bancroft.

"Thank you Tony" he said to my father while he shook his hand.

"Thank you Captain," he said. "But it was Raymond here who really deserves the credit. He and his friends are responsible for coming up with a rescue plan to free us; allowing us to take back the ship."

"Daddy!" Becky who came onto the bridge with Mike, Carol, Luther and our mother. She ran to dad and hugged him. "I was so scared!"

"Me too honey." He replied with a big smile and a hug. "Me too."

While we were busy hugging one another, the ship was approaching the mysterious space platform. It was really huge. Even

from this distance. I mean REALLY huge. The *Sovereign of the Sky* could easily fit into the station's hanger bay. In fact you could fit at least another fifty *Sovereign of the Sky* class passenger spaceliners inside its enormous bay. We all gazed at it through the front viewports in awe.

Mistress Blackwater, who had been left on the bridge in restraints, suddenly said "Behold our greatest achievement! Behold Olympus!"

There was an unmistakable pride in her voice. Olympus Station was indeed a marvel to behold; a great achievement in modern engineering. Pretty much invisible from above, it hung there in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter, near the center of its famous 'red' spot.

"Signal coming through captain." the communications officer said.

Captain Bancroft scratched his white beard and gave my father a glance.

"If I may sir?" my father said, "they are probably expecting to talk with Blackwater."

"I was thinking the same thing." The captain replied.

"She's not going to cooperate." someone said.

"Can we out run them?" the navigator asked.

"Outrun a space station? Of course. It's not moving. But its defenses? That is another story. Am I right Blackwater?" the captain inquired.

She just smiled. Even as we were discussing it, the stations defenses were coming on line.

"Dad?" I said, "I know that this is a civilian vessel and all, but does it have any kind of defenses at all?"

He gave Captain Bancroft an inquiring look.

"The ship has one plaser canon mounted on the dorsal side and one dual rail gun that has never been fired since the ship went into service twelve years ago. I don't even know if we have any ammo for the

darn thing! This is a cruise ship you know.” the captain said. “And the canon only has eight impulse fusion reactors to power it.”

For comparison sake, a typical battleship in the Space Force is powered by sixteen large capacity impulse fusion reactors. Dad told me that some of the newer ships can have up to thirty two of those reactors! As for rail guns, they are also powered by the number of reactors the ship has. But being that it is not an energy weapon like the plaser canons, they don’t use as much power and are more dependent on the warhead projectile it fires.

“No shields?” Dad asked.

“Just deflectors like any other spaceliner.” The captain said almost apologetically. Of course with a ship this size, those deflectors have to be pretty large. There was no question about it. We had to try to escape.

The captain ordered the helm to reverse our heading. Almost immediately a plaser bolt was fired across our bow. Everyone was nervous and the tension on the bridge could be cut with a knife.

“Helm, what’s our speed?” Bancroft asked.

“One quarter, captain.” The helms man replied. (That’s about 100,100 km/h to you and me.)

“Well gun the thing man! Full speed!” the captain shouted. From deep in the bowels of the ship we felt the mighty engines come to life, delivering every bit of thrust they could muster.

Of course we couldn’t just get away.

A rather large ship left the docking bay of the enormous station. Not as big as the *Sovereign* but large enough. The ship was an older military vessel, probably a ship that Blackbeard had captured previously.

“A light cruiser.” My father said.

“Very observant of you commander.” Blackwater said. “It’s the *Queen Anne Revenge*, my father’s flagship.”

“He really has a fantasy about the real Blackbeard from centuries ago.” My mother said, looking at the ship’s image on the monitor.

“We all have our little qwerks.” Blackwater smirked.

My mother just looked at her. “I guess the nut don’t fall far from the tree.”

With that, she lunged at my mom, but she was restrained by Spaceman First Class Bryant, the security recruit that held her by the arm.

“Spaceman, please escort our friend to a secure room,” my father said. “Let’s also separate her lieutenants from the rest of the bunch in the brig. Place each of them in separate rooms. And spaceman, make sure those rooms don’t have escape hatches. And keep them in restraints.”

They left the bridge.

An hour later, the group of us had assembled on the Strip. Mike, not having any family here onboard, stayed with us after we regained the ship. We talked of the ordeal that we just endured and the loss of Sara. Mike was very quiet.

“That really wasn’t your fault you know.” I said to him. “It was the pirate’s fault and ultimately Mistress Blackwater.”

“It was my fault!” he said to me, I could feel the guilt in his voice. “If only I had listened to you, she wouldn’t be dead. She was just a little girl, Raymond. She shouldn’t be dead.” Tears were in his eyes.

“I know.” I said. “But justice will be done. My father will see to it.”

Just then Sonja and Amie joined us, each drinking a milkshake that they had gotten at McD’s. Amie’s parents were entertainers on the ship. In fact, they were somewhat famous, though old style smooth jazz was never my thing.

“My dad says that we all could use a good show. So he and the

other entertainers are over at the Savoy working on a new one for our last evening together on the ship.” Amie said.

The support crews and the entertainers had been kept in a fourth cargo bay on deck eighteen. Luckily none of them were hurt during their captivity. With all of the drama of the pirate’s I had completely forgot about them! I was busy concentrating on the crew and our parents. I kept my guilt to myself though. I didn’t want them to think I was too self-centered.

Sonja suddenly asked, “Ray, would you care to go to that show with me this evening?”

Could this be a date? I asked myself. Is she asking me out?

“Uh...sure.” I said.

“Great!” she said with a big grin on her face.

My dad suddenly appeared on the Strip and his mood did not look good.

“I want all of you to report to quarters! Now!” he shouted so everyone could hear.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He took me aside and said, “We still haven’t shaken Blackbeard. So far we have been able to stay ahead of him but I don’t know how long that will last. The nearest Space Force ship is seven hours away still. I want all of you to stay in your quarters till we can get a good handle on this.”

“Okay dad.” I said.

Then it hit me. I mean, it really hit me! A plaser blast that is. I spun around in agonizing pain as my father tackled me to the ground. In the same moment he had his plaser in his hand ready to return fire.

I looked up and Craig Wilson was diving for cover just as my father’s blast struck a waste disposal unit near his head. They had lost track of him while they were sweeping the ship for strays.

The other kids had already started to disperse, so only Mike,

Becky and I were in the immediate area. The others, who were still leaving, found cover when the shooting started.

When it ended, Craig was lying on the floor. From somewhere I heard my mom scream .Then the world grew dark as my father and Becky stood over me. I didn't feel any pain anymore. I just wanted to sleep.

Truth be told, I really don't remember much about what happened next. In fact, the next thing I remember is that the ship was shaking and I heard explosions and people screaming. We were under attack.

I rose to my feet suddenly, startling the medic that was tending to my injury. Just as suddenly I fell back, dizzy and unbalanced. My mom, who had been in the room with me, told me to relax and that dad, had everything under control.

Another round of violent shaking and I knew that everything was not "under control". Again I tried to get up. This time I took it slower, fighting off the shakiness of my body, and the well-intended arms of my mother and the technician. As I rose to my feet, I found my right shoulder was stiff and unable to move. The medic had already patched me up, given me something for the pain and had immobilized my arm. Mom continued to tell me to lie back down but I guess I have too much of my father in me. I made my way to the bridge.

When I arrived, I found that the pirate vessel had caught up to us. Of course I knew that already. What I didn't know is that my father had taken over the captain's chair and was in fact, the acting captain.

Captain Bancroft was in the first officer's station, advising my dad. As he told me after this encounter, Bancroft had asked him to take over temporary because of my father's experience in ship warfare tactics. *Sovereign of the Sky* was a civilian passenger liner. Even though the ship does not have much in the way of weaponry, my father

would make up in knowing how to handle the ship in combat.

Dad was busy trying to keep the ship's engines from being hit and disabled. So far the *Queen Anne* had not used its full force against us. Good thing too because being a warship to begin with, the *Queen Anne* could easily have easily turned our ship into spare parts. He used the ships navigational shields to deflect much of the *Queen Anne's* onslaught directed away from us. Those shields, based in part on gravplate technology, are used mostly for protecting the ship from meteors and things like that, but he was using them to deflect rail gun fire.

Here I should mention what a rail gun is. Basically it is a device that expels a missile or other projectile along a rail system that conducts electricity and it has something to do with magnetism. I won't pretend to say that I fully understand it, but these guns can project a missile at nearly the speed of light, obliterating anything that is in its path. The single one that the *Sovereign* carries is used primarily for destroying obstacles such as meteorites. Oh and I should point out that it takes two minutes to charge the capacitors. In other words, we can use it once every two minutes.

The *Queen Anne* by the looks of it was a light cruiser or what would be called a frigate. The system aboard the *Queen Anne Revenge* used two dual guns, powered by sixteen fusion reactors as opposed to our eight. Not a ship of the line, but deadly none the less. It was designed for fast attack and maneuverability under fire. It had sixteen fusion reactors, four rail guns, and twenty four plasmer cannons mounted on its port and star port sides.

How do I know all of this information about the ships the Space Force use?

Well, Ben and Ronald, I will tell you. Remember the books you saw in my dad's computer the last time you were visiting us on Luna? They were Space Force books from his days at the academy. I used to

read them. In fact ...I want to follow my dad into the service when I am old enough.

Of course I first had to get through the current situation.

“It seems that they want this ship.” My father said to no one particular. “The question is why?”

“Could it be that he knows we have his daughter?” an ensign asked in response to the question.

“No.” I said. My father noticed me standing there. “I heard her father tell her that he would have no problem killing her just like he had killed her mother.”

“What a lovely family.” someone said.

“So what do they want from us? It can’t just be that they want slaves.” Dad said.

“This ship.” Captain Bancroft said while starrng at the enemy ship. “They want this ship!”

“But it is a passenger ship! What are they gonna do with it? Take a cruise?” the navigator said.

“No but they might refurbish it as a warship. A pretty big warship. It would be a formidable foe for a ship of the line. They would need to reinforce the hull and add some cannons. Maybe add some more rail guns, and defiantly upgrade the power cores. If they have the resources to build something like *Olympus* in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter, right under our noses using a cloak no less, then they should not have any problem converting this ship.” my dad said.

“Here is a thought,” I said. “Have anyone seen the Colonial Leaders?”

As I suspected they had simply vanished. No one had yet found the dozen or so political leaders since the ship had been taken. But what would the pirates want with politicians?

ELEVEN

“We surrender.” I heard my dad say.

The man on the screen before him just smiled. For all of the publicity, Blackbeard did not look as ferocious as we were led to believe. He was an older man with a neatly trimmed beard that had more grey than black. His hair was long for a man, about shoulder length. The eyebrows were thick and unkempt. His voice had an accent that I could not place.

“A very wise choice Commander. Relinquish the ship to Adel.”

“To who?”

“Oh that’s right! You know her as Mistress Blackwater.” He said with a chuckle. “You know, I forgot that she can be so melodramatic sometimes... where she gets such ideas I will never know.”

“I am sorry,” my dad said. “she was injured during our little scuffle with your ship. She is in our med center in a coma.”

“I see.” Blackbeard stared at my father. “In that case, power down all systems including life support.”

“I can’t. You see, the captain and much of the crew is dead.” My father lied. “I am here just as a temporary captain. I don’t know all of the ships systems.”

“You are an incompetent fool commander!” Blackbeard yelled. “Stand to and prepare to be boarded by my men.”

“Yes Sir!” my dad replied. “We are powering down the systems we have access to and preparing for your boarding party.”

The ship stopped its backward momentum and drifted. The

pirate vessel came within point blank range of our rail gun. At the precise moment, my father said one word: "Fire."

Immediately the fully charged rail gun fired and a medium yield projectile into the bridge of the pirate ship only six kilometers away, exploding on contact.

My dad then shouted, "Full speed!" and the mammoth ship accelerated, vectoring away from the now damaged warship.

A small auxiliary shuttle was ejected during the 'battle' and now accelerated towards the pirate ship. Later I learned that Mistress Blackwater had escaped from Spaceman Bryant. The shuttle had reached the *Queen Anne* and was brought aboard her. Disabled, the pirate ship did not give chase.

"I don't believe it! It worked!" Captain Bancroft said. "You did it!" everyone who was on the bridge gave each other congratulations and slaps on the backs. It appears that we had seriously incapacitated the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, however we could not rule out the possibility that Captain Tobias Jones might have escaped. The *Queen Anne* had not been destroyed by our lucky shot, just put out of commission for a while.

A few hours later we were docked with the *U.S.A.S. Liberty*, a *Ship Of The Line* out of Io station. The remaining pirate crew was transferred to the United Solar System Alliance's military vessel to be transported to the Space Force base on Io.

I and the rest of the passengers stayed onboard the *Sovereign* to continue on our journey to Europa. Captain Bancroft was exceedingly grateful to my father for his assistance during the emergency and asked him if he and the rest of the military onboard could assist the ship's regular security force with the aftermath. Of course he agreed.

Unfortunately, by the time the *U.S.A.S. Liberty* reached the coordinates of where we had left the *Queen Anne's Revenge's* disabled mass, she was gone. It most likely had returned to *Olympus*, the totally

invisible and undetectable giant space station in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter. Where they got the technology and manpower to achieve such a construction without anyone knowing about it remained a mystery.

In the end, onboard the *Sovereign of the Sky*, there were twenty eight pirates who were killed. Four civilians including Sara also perished. Sara's mother had to be medicated because of the overwhelming grief she was experiencing at the loss of her oldest daughter.

Her twins were cared for by Amie's mom. They also were upset, knowing that something had happened to their big sister and that it made their mother cry. Mom told us that it wasn't our place to inform the little girls of what had happened. The best we could do is comfort them.

All of us were checked out by the ship's physician or the military doctors from the *Liberty*. After twenty eight hours, the *Sovereign* was able to continue on to Europa.

A short twenty two hours later we were approaching Europa station. After docking, we were given explicit instructions not to talk about the specifics of the pirate attack to the news bloggers, especially those of us who really knew about the entire incident. That included our group of eleven kids.

Ever since the incident on Ganymede station a few weeks ago, the newsies have been paying special attention to pirate related terrorism. It seems that a pirate group, also working in the name of Tobias Jones, took several hundred people hostage. In that incident they destroyed the station and hundreds of innocent lives were lost.

The atmosphere on the station was thick with news people swarming all around us as if we were holovid stars when we arrived on the main promenade. Handheld holorecorders were thrust into the faces of most of the adults and even some of us kids, all by reporters

asking the same questions over and over again. Except for the one reporter who asked if I was glad it was over with. I just looked at him. 'Idiot!' I thought.

All in all it was a pretty hectic day, and I was very pleased when we finally made it to the Howard Johnson's on the station. Dad had been escorted to an "off limits" part of the station for a debriefing by intelligence officers from Space Force Command along with most of the other Space Force personnel. The day after tomorrow we would go down to Europa's surface and Clarke Station on the outskirts of Floyd City.

TWELVE

The Howard Johnson's actually had a pool! It had been years since the last time Becky or I had swam. In fact, I think we were on vacation visiting you guys in Cleveland the last time. Becky and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity. I am glad we did too. Amie and Sonja both were already there. I could not decide who looked better in their swimming suit.

We swam and played in the water for a couple of hours till it was time for dinner. Dad had come back from his debriefing while we were in the pool. As a family we all went to one of the numerous dining rooms on the promenade.

As we entered the establishment, I saw Mike off in the corner with his old man. Upon seeing us he promptly turned away, keeping his back to us deliberately. This was quite peculiar because I had gotten the impression while we were on the *Sovereign of the Sky* that we had become friends. I guess I was wrong.

The restaurant was set up as an all you can eat buffet, complete with ham, fried chicken, potatoes, stuffing and one of my favorites, pizza! I think both Becky and I ate till our stomachs ached. I excused myself to go to the restroom.

As I entered the bathroom, Mike was coming out of one of the stalls. I was taken back. He had a black eye.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh, hi Ray. Nothing. Nothing happened. I just fell down earlier this morning."

“Is that the reason why you pretended to not know me when we walked into the restaurant?” I asked.

“No not at all! I just didn’t see you.” He lied.

“Are you and your dad staying at the Johnson’s?”

“No. He has his own place not far from here in the blue section.” Mike said. He finished washing his hands. ‘Listen I’ll see you around. Say hi to your folks for me will ya?’

“Yeah, sure thing.” I said as I entered the stall. As I sat down I heard someone else enter the room.

“What’s taking you so long? You’re just like your worthless mother!” A gruff voice said as Mike and his father left the bathroom.

I suddenly got a sick feeling in my gut, and it wasn’t from having too much food to eat. Mike had been traveling alone because his mother was sent him to go and live with his father on Europa. I wondered just how good of an idea that was.

The following day as we were preparing to leave the station, Sonja came running to our room at the HJ.

“Raymond! I am glad I caught you before you left!” she said as she caught her breath. “It’s Michael! He is in the MedCenter!”

“What happened?” I asked, afraid of what the answer would be.

“He shot himself!” she replied.

I wasn’t expecting that. I was caught completely by surprise. In fact, I was speechless. Mom and dad understood that I wanted to be there for my friend, and made last minute arrangements for me to be able to stay a few days more at the HJ. Though I would be by myself, Archie, one of the managers of the hotel, volunteered to check in on me.

As we walked to the center, I was kicking myself for not telling anyone what I suspected. I sensed that Mike and his father did not get along and that he could be very abusive. Sure Mike was a big guy, but he was still a fourteen year old kid.

As Sonja and I turned a corner to go to his room, we saw his

father sitting there, half asleep. The big black man looked at me.

“You must be Mike’s friends from the *Sovereign*.” He said.

“Y-Yes. I am Raymond Rodriguez.” I said. “She is Sonja.”

“I know. He told me all about your little adventure.” he said.

“Go on in, he’s awake.”

We stepped past him and entered the room.

Mike was sitting up in the bed, with his hands behind his head and the biggest grin on his face.

“Hey Ray! Hey Sonja!” he said.

I felt like the joke was on us. He was alright! I snatched up a stray pillow from the chair next to the bed and hit him with it, laughing.

“Dude! I told my parents to go on down to the surface without me because of you!” I said. ‘And here you are, all sitting well and pretty!’”

“Hey I DID shoot myself. Honest!” Mike said. “It was in my foot.”

For the next few minutes he told us the story of how he had found an old fashioned revolver among his father’s things. He had picked it up and the gun fired, hitting his left foot.

For the next hour we sat there in the hospital room and talked, enjoying each other’s company. Amie even chimed in with her new wicom via the EIN. She and her parents had gone down to the surface of Europa on the same transport my parents were on. It was a fun time for us even though it was in a hospital room.

The next day Mike was released from the hospital. I don’t know if it was just me, but it seemed that his mood changed after he left. That feeling that I had had at the restaurant returned. Something just was not right.

After a good lunch, Mike, Sonja and I stopped by my room so I could pick up my bag, and then we went to the shuttle bay for my afternoon flight to Floyd City. It was hard to say goodbye to my friends

after all we had been through. Something told me that I would see them again soon.

***PARC TWO:
THE FURY OF
CAPTAIN COBIAS JONES***

THIRTEEN

“It is with great sadness that we must report that the spaceliner *Sovereign of the Sky* was lost this evening as it was leaving the Jovian system bound for Mars.” the announcer said on the holovision. “There is no word yet on how many people survived, but it is reported that there are over one thousand passengers on the passenger roster and more than two hundred crew members not including the entertainers onboard. There are also reports coming in that this is the work of the notorious pirate Blackbeard, also known as Captain Tobias Jones. As more details come in, we will keep you informed.

“In other news... Space Force Command has confirmed that the political leaders of the twelve major colonial worlds are still missing, rumored to be prisoners of Captain Tobias Jones, rumors that he denies via a statement released by the web. Authorities however are standing by their story that they do not know who has taken them. As you will recall, all twelve leaders were passengers aboard the now destroyed, *Sovereign of the Sky* some three weeks ago...”

Needless to say, we were stunned. Less than three weeks ago, we had been on that ship. “Poor Captain Bancroft! Poor Amie!” was all I could think as my family and I watched the 3d projection. Amie had been a friend that we had met while onboard. My mom, who had up until now had been reading an eBook, had tears in her eyes as did my sister, Becky. My own eyes were moist as well.

Later that day, I was ‘outside’ looking up at Jupiter and Io. I saw Ganymede low on the horizon. Life here was not totally different

from life on Luna. We still lived underneath a giant dome, though there is both an oxygen atmosphere and oceans with water. The air is very thin though, sorta like being upon Mt. Everest only with less oxygen. It's also really cold, nearly as cold as the void of space itself.

The dome extends nearly a mile and a half high, just like the ones on Luna. My dad says that eventually with the terraforming work being done, we may be able to live outside of the dome one day. Of course, I will be an old man by that time.

Floyd City is not named for a music group from a century and a half ago, like some people think. No, it is named for a character in a book from a century and a half ago. That book was written by Arthur C. Clarke and the name of the book was *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Evidently, Europa was important to the plot, though I was also told that it played a larger role in its sequel, *2010: The Year We Made Contact*. I must read them one day. Anyway, the SFC station is named for the author and the city was named after the character.

Where was I? Oh, I was describing the city. The glass used for the dome is non-reflecting, so when we look up through it, we don't see a reflection of our own town. It only covers Floyd. The SFC base, where my dad spends most of his time, is not covered and is opened to the harsh environment of the surface.

Floyd is almost the size of Cleveland on the surface, however the structures underneath the giant dome does not extend as high as they do in your city. I would say that our fair city is quite a bit larger than Cleveland if you include the underground structures as well. So dear cousins, don't think that I live in a tiny little town! It is the largest permanently settled city on Europa.

"Did you hear the news?" Sonja asked when I answered her wicom signal. She and I have spent a lot of time together over the past three weeks.

"How could I not hear about it?" I said to her.

“It’s freaky that we were just on that ship!” she said.

“I know- poor Amie and her parents!” I responded. Amie had been one of our friends onboard the *Sovereign of the Sky*. Her parents were famous jazz musicians who performed on the ship. She like Sonja, Mike and I were largely responsible for rescuing our parents from the pirates that had tried to enslave us on the trip out here to Europa.

My shoulder still ached a bit from when I was shot so I was a little irritable. “Why do you think Blackbeard went after the ship again?”

“Revenge?” she said. Her dark hair caught highlights of the hues of orange and yellow that Jupiter was beaming through the dome.

“That doesn’t make much sense to me.” I said.

“Think of it like this; He is the biggest and baddest of the bad guys out there right? Your dad took out his flagship with just one shot! Using a cruise ship no less! Blackbeard didn’t like that, so at his next opportunity he went after The Sovereign.” she said as though proving a point in court. “It’s called ego.”

“Yeah I can see that,” I concurred. “But I still think he wanted to capture her instead of destroy her. I think he wanted to convert her to a battleship, isn’t that why he wanted us for slaves? To work on the conversion for him? You know, the welding and riveting and installing the various components and such?”

“Yeah, Blackwater did say something like that. If I remember correctly she said that ‘we were able to be taught easily and young enough to control easily.’

“I am hungry.” she said changing the subject. “Let’s go over to Pizza Tony’s and get a few slices!”

Even though for once I really wasn’t in the mood for pizza, I went anyway, following her over to the next street where the pizza pallor was.

Before you ask, yes- we do have cars, well... sorta. The cars we have are electric. Nothing unusual about that. Ours though do not have

drivers. We simply tell the car where we want to go and it goes, automatically. Of course Sonja and I are still too young to use the cars (you must be over sixteen), but they are there.

We sat there in front of Pizza Tony's for about an hour just talking. Both of us had some of the same classes at the junior high, so we found lots to talk about. Like it was on the ship, we have classes year round with three weeks off between each semester.

I had just finished my soda when I noticed something move by the trash dumpster near the rear of the building. It looked like a man. A man that was injured. Sonja and I went over to investigate. The man had been badly beaten hours before we found him and was just regaining consciousness.

"The Sovereign... disaster," the middle aged man said gasping for air, "it...wasn't...Black beard!...He didn't...do it. It..." the man started to nod off again. Sonja called the authorities.

"Who was it? Who are you?" I shouted holding his head in my lap.

"It was...SFC..." he said with his dying breath. "Space Force Command..."

FOURTEEN

“Space Force Command?” I said to Sonja via the wicom a few hours later. “Impossible!”

“You heard him just like I did!” she said.

Something had told us not to reveal what his last words were. Call it an intuition.

Anyway, the security force had swarmed all over the area looking for clues to the murder. We had to answer a lot of questions and our folks were called to take us home. No one it seemed knew who he was. He had no wallet and no identification. From what the news blogs said his prints and DNA came back negative, meaning no one had any record of him. Being on the far side of middle age (about seventy five or so) it was impossible for our mystery man to have no record whatsoever. This means that he was far too old to have been born here. And if he came in through an airlock, there would have to be some kind of record of who he was somewhere.

“He must be lying.” I said to Sonja.

“With his last breath? Come on, you don’t believe that any more than I do.” she said. After a moment of silence she continued, “You know, we have to tell someone.”

“I know....Who?” I said.

“Your father maybe?”

“He is a member of Space Force.” I said. “I can’t ask him to investigate his own organization.”

“Why not? Do you really think he had any knowledge about

this? I mean, really?" she said.

"Of course not. It's just..." I knew she was right. I was just confused.

"He is the second most important person on that base. He should be able to get to the bottom of this." she said. "What was his reaction when he heard the news of the disaster?"

"I don't know he hasn't come home yet." I replied. "I suppose that it is possible that one hand doesn't know what the other is doing?"

"There you go!" she said.

"I will talk with him tonight when he gets home. I will see you tomorrow at school?" I asked.

"Of course. Goodnight." She said.

"Goodnight."

Click! Beep! Beep!

I heard faint electronic sounds in the background. I had a bad feeling, as if any minute something was going to happen. Or like someone was watching me.

A few hours later when my dad came home, I was waiting.

"Dad, you heard the news?" I asked as he sat down in his favorite chair in the living room.

"That is the reason I am so late coming home." he said as he picked up his pad from the little table next to him. "The entire base was on condition red until the last few hours. I heard there was a little excitement here while I was on base?"

"Yeah I guess you can say that. A man died in my arms." I said as I began to tell him the whole story. "But there is one thing that I didn't tell the investigators. The man said that Blackbeard wasn't responsible for what had happened to the *Sovereign of the Sky*. He said that it was you; or should I say- Space Force."

"Who else knows about this? Sonja?" he asked suddenly alarmed.

“Yes.” Now I really was scared.

“Come with me. We’ll pick up Sonja on the way.” My dad grabbed his uniform shirt and together we got into the car out front. “You are sure that your mom and Becky don’t know anything about this?”

“Well yeah, I mean...mom had to pick me up from the security center where I gave a statement to the officers.” I told him. “But we both left out that little bit of information. Is this important? You know something about it don’t you?”

“Did you talk about this in person with her or over your wicom?” he asked.

“The wicom.” I said in answer to his question. “There was a funny kinda noise when I ended the call.”

“Now I am sure.” He said as the car pulled up to Sonja’s house.

I stayed in the car as he went in to talk with her mother and to get Sonja. When he returned he said “both of you take off your wicoms. Now!”

We took them off and handed them to him. He promptly stopped the car, got out and threw them onto the ground and stomped on the wrist computers, thoroughly breaking them into several pieces. Then he picked them up and threw the pieces into a public fountain that we were passing. He then got into the vehicle once again and this time gave the voice control interface a destination of Clarke SFB.

“Hey you can’t just take my wicom and destroy it like that!” Sonja said in an angry voice. “My mom works hard for her money! I hate you!”

My father was quiet. The look on his face said “Don’t mess with me.” After a few minutes he looked at us and said, “They were listening in on your conversation and know what the mystery man told you; dangerous information- if true.”

We exited the vehicle at the main building, where my father

works. All of the guards came to attention when they saw my father come their way. Standing tall they all saluted him. He returned each salute, and I was proud of my dad each time.

We entered my father's office, which was pretty large, decorated in rich exotic woods, the real stuff mind you, imported all the way from Earth. On the floor was a large, red oriental rug. The desk looked to be as big as the car we just got out of.

He walked around the desk and hit a button. "Major Sinclair, please step into my office." Then my father told us to sit down on one of the rich leather couches that occupied the room. "Ray, I don't believe you have ever been in here before have you?"

"No." I said as I looked around the room. I could tell that Sonja was also impressed with the décor, even though she was still angry.

"Nice huh?" my dad sat down in a chair next to us. "This really isn't my style. It was my predecessor's. But since it is here, why not enjoy it?"

Major Sinclair knocked on the door and came in and stood at attention.

"Major Zachary Sinclair reporting as ordered, sir!"

"At ease. Zach I would like for you to meet my son Raymond." He said as he shook my hand. "And his friend Sonja Kincaid."

"Ma'am."

"Major." She said.

"Kids, tell him what you told me earlier." My dad said while motioning for him to sit down.

We told the story once again. By the time we finished, my dad and the major just looked at each other.

"I wish you two hadn't stumble upon this. But now you have become part of it." My dad said. "There are some very bad men who are part of a large conspiracy to undermine Space Force's authority, maybe even that of the United Solar Alliance itself. I can't give you all of the

details, but your lives are particularly in danger.” he said with a pained look on his face.

“Mr. Rodriguez,” Sonja began, easing her anger towards him a bit, “Why are we in danger? I don’t understand.”

“You know too much, Ms. Kincaid.” the major said. “And I am afraid that the bad guys know that you know too much. They have already killed over two thousand people already, including our mystery victim. It doesn’t take a genius to know that they won’t think twice at killing a couple of kids.”

“The real reason why I was transferred here instead of another shipboard command is that they wanted me to get to the bottom of this.” my dad said. “My bosses back on Earth had an idea that something was going on out here. And it seems they were right.”

FIFTEEN

I could tell that he never wanted his mission to endanger anyone in his family. It was tearing him up inside that I was involved. I was not real thrilled about it either. But sometimes it seems that fate or providence can have its own idea's, whether we like it or not.

Mom and Becky were brought to the base and sequestered with me, as was Sonja's mom. My dad issued replacement wicom for both her and I, making Sonja a very happy girl. These replacements were top of the line, much better than the ones that were destroyed.

After two days, we were all beginning to go space happy, with limited contact to the outside world. Our world was the SFC base, and the people my dad trusted on his staff. My father's boss on the base, Admiral Bill Coleman attempted to visit with us but my dad made up some excuse to call him away before we could get into a real conversation. I don't think my father really trusted him. I don't think that he was aware of my father's true mission.

Late on the third night of our stay, I was kidnapped while I slept. It is quite an unsettling experience to wake up in a place other than where you fell asleep. In this case, I woke up on Europa station.

The room was stark in appearance, with only a bed and a toilet. The walls and the floor and ceiling were all white. One wall had a window through which I could see Europa. Jupiter was also visible, as it always seem to be anywhere in the Jovian system. On the opposite wall was a large mirror, through which I was certain I was being watched. Still another wall contained a door.

I have no idea how much time had elapse since I was kidnaped. Unlike being on a planet, there were no exterior signs to mark the passage of time. My interior sense of time told me that it has been at least a day that I have been held in my spartan prison.

I was hungry. My stomach told me that I had not had anything to eat or drink for a long time. It must have been evident because shortly after I woke, a tray with baloney sandwiches was slid into my room underneath the door. Also on the tray was a plastic cup of juice and one that contained water.

When the slot was opened to deliver the food, I heard in the distance Sonja's voice, cursing a mile a minute. It was faint, like she was also in a room like the one I was in. I gazed through the small window and found that there was another room directly across from mine.

So they (whoever *they* were) had both of us.

It felt like a day or two had passed before I was allowed to see and talk with someone though I didn't like the conversation very much. The mirror in the room suddenly became translucent, allowing me to see the silhouette of a man. A bright light radiating from behind him concealed his features from me.

"Hello Mr. Rodriguez." an obviously electronically disguised voice blared from a hidden speaker system. "We are glad to have you with us. You should know that the glass window behind you can be broken out with just a push of this button on this panel. So if I feel that you are being less than honest with me, all I have to do is push it and you will be spaced. Do we understand one another?"

"Yes." I said. I felt like I was an actor, playing a part in a holomovie.

"Good. You should also be aware that I have a friend of yours here as well." He said as he pulled down a holoviewer that had been suspended above his head.

"Sonja!" I shouted. I could see Sonja in a room almost exactly

like mine. She was sitting in a corner of the room staring out the window at Europa. Her hair was unkempt and I could tell that she had been crying. I thought I saw a rip in her blouse. From her physical position (holding her knees to her chest with her arms wrapped around them) I was unable to tell for sure. It was clear that she had been hurt though.

“She is a very lovely young woman, Mr. Rodriguez.” The stranger said. “I would hate to see that window blow while she is in the room.” His implication was obvious.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” I shouted.

“Information.”

“What information? I am just a kid! I don’t know anything!”

“Yes you do, Mr. Rodriguez. I think you know more than you think.” The man said.

The man asked me many questions; did I know my father’s real mission? What were the last words of the man who died at Pizza Tony’s? Did anyone else hear what the mystery man said? Who was loyal to my father on the Clarke station’s staff? Something about zero point generators? I must have told them the story of what had happened that day five times. But each time I left out the part where the guy said that SFC was responsible for the *Sovereign of the Sky* incident. That is until the last time they asked me.

“...And before the man died did he not tell you anything?” the man in silhouette asked.

“No. I told you before, he said nothing! He just mumbled to himself and then died!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

“I see.” The man said. “I had the sensors in this section of the station disconnected. So if there is a fire, or hull breach, no one will ever know. Let us see if they did a good job, shall we?” the man moved a

couple of knobs and almost immediately, I saw the window in Sonja's room slide down just a little via the video monitor.

Almost as instantly her eyes opened wide and her hair flew towards the opened crack. She was gasping for air while desperately trying to hold on to the bed frame, which thankfully was bolted to the floor. In the same instance, I shouted out her name.

"Sonja! No!" I cried. The terror I felt at that moment was indescribable. How can anyone be that evil? "She is only a kid! Stop it!" I pleaded. "I will tell you!"

The window went up partially and I saw Sonja, lying on the floor crying. It was also now evident that her blouse had been ripped, for her brassier was exposed. The mattress (which was the only loose item in the room) was also on the floor near the deadly window.

"Well?" the man said.

"He said that the Space Force was responsible for the *Sovereign of the Sky's* destruction! I swear that is the truth!" I said.

"And who else knows this? Did you tell your father?"

"No one else knows, just the two of us." I replied.

"And your father?"

"He doesn't know. I swear it!" I lied. "In all of the commotion surrounding the incident, I forgot to mention it."

"Then why did he move you into Clarke Station suddenly?" the dark man asked.

"I don't know." I said. His hand went for the switch that would lower the window in Sonja's room again. "I swear! I don't know!"

His hand froze. I held my breath. I prayed to everything that was Holy for him to believe my lie.

"What do you know about Zero Point Generators?" he asked.

"Huh?" I was thrown off by this sudden line of questioning.

"What do you know about Zero Point Generators?" he repeated.

"Absolutely nothing!" I said, but I thought to myself, 'for now.'

Then he relaxed and returned his hand to his side. The mirror again went opaque and I found myself looking at my own reflection again.

SIXTEEN

Four meal periods and a two sleep cycles passed before I saw anyone again. When I did, I was surprised.

As I lay sleeping, I was awoken by the sound of plaser fire. From the sound of it, it was pretty close. Eventually the fighting ended. The door to my room opened and several burly men entered the room. They escorted me to Med Center where I was placed in a room.

The doctor checked me over and I was given something to eat and to drink. Shortly after that, I was taken to Sonja. When I saw her, I ran to her. She met me with equal joy. We hugged and cried together, each of us pleased to see the other alive. I don't remember now, but I think I might have even kissed her!

Anyway, while we were hugging, Mike appeared at the door.

"Are you two finished yet?" he asked as if he had been waiting forever.

"Mike!" we both shouted at the same time. He joined us in our little huddle.

"I am so glad to see you!" I said.

"The same here" he replied. He looked good though there was a change in him that I could not put a finger on. I didn't think that that was the best time to confront him with my observations so I just went with the flow of the moment. We talked and Sonja and I compared stories, all under the watchful eye of the guards that were posted to us for our protection.

Major Sinclair entered into the room.

“It’s good to see the two of you are safe. And Michael, you did a good job. All three of you will be returning to the surface tomorrow. Until then I suggest that you eat a good dinner and then get some rack time. And before I forget, we have taken the liberty of calling your parents. Spaceman-,” he turned to a young spaceman first class recruit who immediately produced two comlinks and handed them to the Major, “In fact they are on the horn right now.” He said as he handed Sonja and I one of the devices each.

My father was very happy to hear my voice, but remained restrained in his show of emotions. My mom and Becky both had no problem showing their emotions. They were crying tears of joy when they heard my voice.

It seems that Sonja and I spent eleven days in captivity. The first few days were spent in an unconscious state. We both were drugged and taken while we were asleep. The problem was that we were taken from inside a secured area of Clarke Station.

My father theorized that there was someone on the base that allowed for this to happen- an inside man if you will. He couldn’t talk in more detail over the comlink, so he told me that we would talk in person tomorrow. He also told me that Mike would be coming with us.

“Why?” I asked him after the Major left and the three of us were alone.

“I have to apologize to you Raymond.” he began while looking down at the floor. “That day when I ignored you in the restaurant, you were right. I did ignore you on purpose. The black eye you saw wasn’t from having an accident like I told you. It was a present from my dear old dad. I was ashamed.” He looked up at Sonja and I. There were tears in his eyes.

“And one other thing, the gun wound that I had, well I was really trying to kill myself. But I couldn’t do it. I chickened out. The gun went off by accident I got it to the side of my head.”

We both starred.

“But...why?” Sonja began, “we are all so young, with so much to live for. Why would you want to end it all?”

“Because I feel like I am nothing but a thug! A bad boy who likes to write poetry! I even wrote one about that day.” He handed me a sheet of paper. Sonja and I got close to read it together:

My Depression

This long dark tunnel has no escape
Except for the tiny light ahead.
Surrounding me is only the darkness
Of all the things I dread.
I have no fear of dying,
In truth- its living that I fear.
But still the darkness calls to me
Whispering to me in my ear.

“I am Death- your friend, your buddy
The One you know so well!
Come and walk with me
Let me guide you straight to hell!”

“No!” I say “I am stronger than this!
You will not fool me again!
I can see right through you
I see the evil in your plan!”

“Look around you young fool, I AM the darkness
The embodiment of what you fear!
The loss of everyone you love once more
And the fear- it’ll happen again!

My sting runs deep and pierces your soul
This, you know to be true.
You are weak, you are helpless and
There is nothing you can do.”

By Michael Robinson

We both looked at one another. Then we looked up at Mike. Neither of us knew what to say. Mike, the biggest and strongest of us had been physically abused apparently by his father. And the scars were not all visible. In fact, the deepest wounds were inside of him.

“What happened to your mother?” I asked.

“Let’s just say that she didn’t want me. That is why she sent me out here to Europa Station.” he said, the tears subsiding.

“When your mother contacted me and told me you two were missing, I realized that something was kinda fishy with my dad. I did a little digging in his office desk and I found out that he was not a simple maintenance engineer like I was told, but a highly trained Space Force Specialist and a member of something called Department X. As it turned out, my snooping saved the two of you.

“It was a piece of scrap paper I found in my dad’s apartment that had the words ‘Europa Station’ and ‘Section 35 F’ written on it that gave me a hunch that that was where you were. I told your father about my suspicions and well, here you are. They found you.” he said.

“My father is a very bad man. You are lucky Ray; you have a really good father. I hope you appreciate him.”

I truly did.

SEVENTEEN

Rene Robinson was a very resourceful man. He was still loose on the station somewhere, thus the reason for the guards to always be present and why Mike was now with us. With a station as large as this one, he could literally be hiding anywhere.

The three of us stayed in the large hospital room together. The room contained four beds; one for each of us. Sonja's "modesty", being that she was the only girl, was protected by a hospital curtain. Besides the beds, there was a holoviewer and four e readers loaded with a large variety of books and magazines. They were also able to play interactive games and browse the EIN with the devices.

Above each bed on the wall were control panels and nozzles allowing attachments for oxygen tubes and other medical gear, reminding us that though this felt like an overnight slumber party, we were still in a hospital room. We stayed up till 0100 talking and playing games via our e readers.

The three guards assigned to us stayed outside of the room, but the room's door was left opened so they could visually keep their eyes on us. Two of the highly trained spacemen stood on either side of the door and the third, a woman, stood across the hall facing the opened door. All three looked sharp, dressed in their service blues uniforms; boots spit and polished to a perfect shine, crisp white ascots and pants that have perfect creases. They each carried side arms and plaser riffles fully charged.

The big difference between a plaser pistol and a rifle is the length of time that the laser part discharges. A pistol will discharge for about one second, in that time the plasma charge travel in the laser

beam to the target, delivering about the same level of destruction every time. Its power pack can last for up to two hundred discharges before needing to be recharged. The riffle on the other hand, besides being heavier and larger than a pistol, has a much longer discharge time, usually somewhere around three or four seconds, delivering that much more destructive force. It can carry enough power for one thousand discharges on average.

Two of those discharges were demonstrated with great effectiveness on the two guards on either side of our door by the woman guard. By the time we realized what was happening, she had entered the room and had the riffle pointed at us. Just like that, we became prisoners again.

A few seconds later Rene Robinson entered the room. He stood before us dressed in a full Space Force Command uniform. On his chest were ribbons and medals indicating he was an officer of high rank. His gloved hands held a baton, a trophy that he was in the habit of carrying while on duty, using it as a pointer or a weapon.

Just a little over one meter in length and made of an alloy that was at once stronger than steel but also light weight, the baton was intricately sculptured at one end into the head of a lion, with vertical grooves extending down to its far end, where it terminated into a solid end cap. The entire object was slightly tapered.

“Hello son,” the man said to Mike.

Mike looked at his father. On his face one could read fear with equal parts of defiance and bravery, mixed again with hatred for the man whose blood runs in his veins. I could almost see his mind racing with bitter thoughts of this man he knew as his father.

“Mom said you left Space Force Command ten years ago.” he said.

“As far as she is concerned, I did.”

“So what is this?” Mike said indicating his father’s uniform.

Rene Robinson thought about his answer for a second, deciding whether or not to bring them into his secret. “I work for a clandestine section within Space Force Intelligence. We hunt down and neutralize the most serious threats to the United Solar Alliance.” He finally answered.

“And I am one of those threats?”

“You became one when you hooked up with those two” he said pointing at Sonja and me.

“They are my friends.”

“Yeah, I know. That is why I am sorry to do this to your mother.”

“Do what?” I asked.

He put the baton into a special holster on his belt and pulled out his service plaser. “Goodbye son.” he said.

EIGHTEEN

“Not on my watch!” Major Sinclair said as the incapacitated female guard behind Rene fell to the floor. In a flash, his gun was aimed point blank at Rene’s head.

“Put your gun down.” Rene said in a calm, cool voice. “Major, you are assaulting a superior officer.”

“You are not in my chain of command, especially if you are planning to kill your own son. Run kids! I got this!” the major told us.

We ran out of the room. Before we could get to the end of the corridor, I heard the sound of plaser fire. I instinctively knew someone was dead. But who?

That plaser blasts had set off alarms, alarms that helped to provide cover for our escape. People were running to various positions in anticipation of a possible terrorist attack. In the confusion that ensued, we lost ourselves in the surge of military personnel crowding the corridors of Europa Station. I only hoped that Major Sinclair was still alive.

But for the three of us, where could we run to? There was no place safe for us on the station. Rene was too resourceful; knew too many hiding places aboard the enormous platform that spun lazily a hundred and forty five kilometers above the moon Europa.

Almost one eighth of the estimated ten billion people now alive live on other worlds besides Earth. Most of them are on Luna or one of the nearly two dozen other “planetary” bodies in the United Solar Alliance with another million plus individuals living aboard one of the

fifty eight space stations such as the one we were on.

The mining of Trillium five, an ore found in many rocky surfaces (except for earth; oddly enough) throughout the solar system has been the catalysts for mankind's expansion into space. Trillium five is used in the modern day fusion reactors that power most of the solar system, including the engines used in modern day spacecraft. Just a sample of the ore the size of a man's fist could power a small city for a year.

So don't think it too odd, my cousins that we found ourselves becoming stowaways aboard an ore mining/refinery ship, The *T.R.S. Galloway*, which had been in port to pick up supplies. Unfortunately the ship was headed back to the asteroid belt.

We were discovered on the third day out when Sonja had sneaked into the galley to get food for all of us. We each had taken our turns at the chore, but it just happened to be her turn, an old man, whose name we learned later was Ben McVeigh, came into the galley at the wrong time.

"What are ye doing in here, lass?" the dirty unkempt man asked.

Sonja was silent- frozen, literally with her hand in a cookie jar.

"I asked ye a question lass. Ye ain't 'spose to be here!" he said. "Come now girlie, we are going to see the kaptin!" He grabbed her hand and took hold of the cookie jar.

"No! Wait!" I said as I walked out from behind the partially closed door Mike and I were hiding behind. Mike rolled his eyes at me and stepped out to where he could be seen also. The three of us were taken to Captain Davis, the CO of the ship.

Captain Davis was a hard working self-made man. His gruff voice matched his gruff exterior. Unshaven, unwashed and covered in dirt from the ore, he reminded me of the old pictures you might see of oil men way back in the early to mid-twentieth century. I believe they

were called Wildcatters. He listened to our story in the ship's mess.

"So you are the three kids that the entire Jovian system is looking for!" he said looking at me with a wide grin on his face. "Don't you know that your parents are worried sick about you? Your father has nearly the entire Space Force on a search and rescue mission to find you!"

"Yes sir," I replied. "My father has vast resources at his disposal."

"You better believe it my boy!"

He looked at the three of us. "Well I guess I can't rightly dump you overboard, now can I? You say that the fella trying to kill ya is your own daddy?" he said pointing at Mike. "How can someone do that to their own kin? I just don't get it!

All right let's get you over to the Doc and let him look at ya. After that we will feed ya. Maybe by that time we will have been able to get ahold of your daddy son." he said, this time directing his comment towards me.

"Mildred!" he shouted into a microphone.

A woman came into the mess at that very moment. She wore jeans and a loose fitting tee shirt and had her hair pinned up in the back of her dark, middle aged head. "You don't have to shout, you old geezer! I am right here!" Mildred said as she examined us.

"Oh, my dear- would you be so kind as to escort our guest over to see the Doc?" the captain said. His whole demeanor had changed when she walked into the room. "I will be in the com trying to contact their folks. Thank you, my pet."

"I got your 'pet'" she said. You could tell that they played like that all the time, like other married couples do sometimes. I sensed that they were deeply in love.

An hour later, Captain Davis came back to the mess where we had just sat down to eat some hamburgers and fries that Ben McVeigh

had cooked for us. He informed us that he was able to contact Space Force and talked with a lieutenant who promised to get a message through to my father.

He then told us that it would be another three weeks at the earliest before he would be able to deliver us back to Europa. Until then we were to 'earn our keep' by doing chores. Old Ben was to oversee that task. All in all it was not a bad trip.

The forty men and women onboard the *T.R.S. Galloway* were dedicated workers. For twelve hours a day in two shifts they worked to gather the ore from chunks of space rock that made up the asteroid belt. Then they applied heat, and refined the chunks to various graded qualities, suitable for many different types of fusion reactors. This trip we were hunting for industrial T5 (that is how they referred to the ore) sources.

The captain called daily to Space Force, giving them updates on our activities. But I began to think that it was strange that I wasn't allowed to talk with my dad. Each day Captain Davis would ask to speak with my father but was always met with some kind of excuse as to why he wasn't available.

On the thirtieth day, an old pocket destroyer warship rendezvoused with *the Galloway*. On its hull, the *Jolly Roger* was clearly displayed.

NINETEEN

Pirates! It could only be bad news.

We were escorted to the main hatchway by Captain Davis, Mildred and old Ben McVeigh with two pirates whose only purpose it seemed was to intimidate us into cooperating. Within the last month, we all had become quite close, with the Captain and Mildred becoming almost like a set of beloved grandparents. Old Ben was kinda like an old uncle. I for one was sorry to leave them.

The pirate vessel's captain had sent his second officer, Commander Alex Dupree and a Lieutenant Guthridge over to retrieve us. The two men introduced themselves and shook Captain Lewis's hand.

"Sir, I have been instructed to convey the captain's thanks in this matter. Good job!" Commander Dupree saluted Captain Davis, a motion that was odd for a pirate and unexpected.

The captain returned his salute and then said, "You had better take care of those kids! If one of them is harmed..." his threat fell onto deaf ears. So instead he turned to us and shook each of our hands. "You kids stay out of trouble now. Ya here?"

"Yes sir." I said. "We will try but I can't make any promises."

"Aye Lads, you be sure to keep ya noses clean!" Ben McVeigh added. "And here, I pack you a little something." He said handing me a bag. I didn't even have to think about what it was because the aroma was so good. "Ole Ben's Mouthwatering Cheese burgers!" he said. We all

thanked him and then we followed the commander through the opened hatch. We entered this new vessel through the docking tube.

As the airlock cycled behind us, Commander Dupree said, “Welcome aboard, kids! The captain is waiting for you in his ready room.”

Turning, he said to Lieutenant Guthridge, “Signal the bridge and let them know they are aboard. Retract the docking tube and prepare to get underway on the captain’s order.”

“Aye Sir!” the lieutenant replied as he scurried off to do his master’s bidding. I heard the ‘clank’ of the docking tube as it retracted into its place on the ship’s exterior. Men and a few women moved to their assigned stations, and in general, the level of activity grew.

We were led up several decks till we reached the bridge. The large room that served as the bridge had a sweeping panoramic view of the surrounding spacescape. The cold airless void lay just on the other side of the nearly one foot thick glass. Close to it were the various stations such as helm, navigation, communications, engineering and weapons control, all arranged in a squared ‘horseshoe’ shaped configuration. Near the center of the rectangular room were the first and second officer’s duty stations with the captain’s chair elevated about a foot off of the floor on its own platform behind them. Along the back wall behind the captain’s station was a large, thick glass wall, sporting a large “*Jolly Roger*” emblem; a skull and crossbones, the universal symbol of pirates since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, etched into the glass. I noticed that beyond that glass wall sat a large man with a long black beard behind a large modern styled desk. The wall parted down the middle of the pirate insignia as the large man behind the desk beckoned us to come in.

He wore of all things, a uniform that looked as if it was four or five hundred years out of date. You know, the kind that those actors in the old swashbuckling videos you see every now and then on the

Entertainment nets wear.

“Welcome!” the pirate said as he stood up offering his hand to us. “Welcome, you must be the three guests we’ve been expecting!” he said with a jolly grin on his face. “My name is Tobias, Tobias Jones to be precise.”

We all looked at one another. The man standing in front of us was not the same man who almost three months ago tried to kidnap us from the *Sovereign of the Sky*.

We must have looked dumbfounded because he said, “I know. My twin brother has been impersonating me.”

“Forgive me sir, but you don’t look like the Blackbeard that we have had dealings with.” I told him. “How do we know that you are the real Tobias Jones?”

“You’ll have to trust me, Raymond Rodriguez. I am not the big bad pirate that the newshounds and the bloggers say that I am. I don’t go around destroying ships if I can help it. Rob them? Yes.

“Besides, do you see any children other than yourselves here on this ship? Of course not! I would never harm a child, at least not on purpose! I don’t like slavery either. But my brother,” indicating the one’s who was impersonating him, “he have taken hundreds of kids your age for his various operations. My people tell me that they are being used in pleasure houses, in labor factories and even as members of their crews, and I am helpless to do anything about it; for the moment.”

“So why are you kidnapping us?” Sonja asked.

“Kidnap! Who said anything about kidnapping?”

“That’s what it is!” Mike said.

“No lad. I am providing a friendly service to yer old man, Raymond.” Tobias said nodding his head in my direction.

We sat in his office for a few hours as he told us of his suspicions about what was going on and gave us the reasons behind

them. He said that the leaders of the twelve colonial worlds were taken to make way for the Syndicate's people, and that the real leaders were probably already dead. By the end, we were all pretty convinced that he was the real Tobias Jones, and while he has probably killed many people during his career, he was not as blood thirsty as the holovids would make him sound. But I still had a suspicion that there was something more, something that he wasn't telling us.

"One question though- how did you fool the transponder into emitting a Space Force code?" it was mostly because of that transponder telling us that the ship was a Space Force vessel that allowed the pirates to approach *the Galloway* without suspicion until it was too late.

"The ship's ID transponder," he continued with a chuckle, "well that can easily be hacked into and changed. Being that this ship used to be a SF vessel, it was very simple to make the temporary modifications needed to fool a civilian vessel." he said with a certain amount of pride.

He went on to tell us about how, by impersonating a Space Force vessel at times, he was able to win the trust of his prey. Is it a sneaky way to gain access to the enemy ship? Oh yeah! But then again, he was a pirate.

"It comes down to money. The Syndicate, including Rene and his bunch wants to destroy the Alliance and in the process grab up all of the T5 mining rights in the entire Solar System!" Tobias said. "They need it for a special project involving a zero point generator. That generator could hold the keys to travel to other star systems. By eliminating the leaders of the major colonies, they can plunge the United Solar Alliance into anarchy and in the confusion, seize control of the government.

"I believe your father" he said pointing at me, "knows this and has placed himself in a position to try and stop it. He is a good man. I respect him very much."

The Stark used to be a twenty four gun pocket battleship built

nearly forty years ago. It was decommissioned thirty years later and sold to a military salvage contractor from whom Captain Tobias Jones had appropriated it. He renamed the ship *The Fury*, updating it to a thirty two gun pocket battleship, updated other systems and added others till now it was an almost completely different ship. More powerful than the frigates that the Space Force used to patrol the Jovian system, it can go toe to toe with all but the most powerful capital ships of the Space Force fleet.

And according to him, he had five more ships of similar design in his small but growing pirate fleet.

TWENTY

Ten days later we were heading for the moon Pasiphae, a moon that had not been developed yet, at least not by the United Solar Alliance. In the far distance, a ship was detected approaching on an intercept course. Another pirate ship.

“Ahoy unidentified vessel!” a voice on the com said. “This is the Devil’s Hammer, prepare to come about and be boarded. Failure to comply will result in your destruction.”

It was clear that the *Jolly Roger* could be seen on its outer hull. Though the approaching ship had only twenty two guns and two rails, it could possibly pose a threat to us.

Sonja was in the gym when Captain Jones sounded general quarters. Mike and I were already on the bridge, having been caught up in another conversation with the captain. I liked Captain Tobias Jones despite his reputation.

The entire ship seemed to suddenly come alive. The crew seemed to know where they needed to be and in only mere seconds, all were at their battlestations. Mike and I stood behind the captain as he donned a headset to answer the hail.

“This is the Fury to the Devil Hammer. I am Captain Tobias Jones and it is you will stand down and come about to be boarded! You will be destroyed if you do not comply! I give you five minutes.” Tobias leaned back in his chair.

“Devil’s Hammer to the Fury! It is you who will stand down! And we may even let your liar of a captain live!” the disembodied voice

replied. "Seeing as how the real Tobias Jones is at his command base. I know this because I had just spoken with him not less than a half hour ago!"

Blackbeard was angry.

"Bah! Gunz, are we within rail range yet?" Captain Jones shouted at his weapons officer.

"Aye, Capt'n! But we still be some distance away for an accurate shot!" Guns replied.

"Fire rails three and four at your convenience- I want you to prepare an immediate broadside after we've come around hard to port! Don't wait for my order! Notify all gun personnel to fire at will to starboard!" the captain ordered. "Make sure that you keep an eye out for any of his 'friends' that might be lurking! I want that ship out of my sky, now!"

The captain's fury was evident by his facial expression. He was taking his ship into battle to clear his name and to restore his sense of honor.

The lights dimmed for a fraction of a second as the rail guns fired there deadly ammunitions at the approaching vessel. At the same instant a pair of torpedoes was released from the other ship.

"Counter measures!" Captain Tobias Jones shouted. Even as our ship made a quick turn to the left, a pair of flare-like objects was hurled from our starboard, a counter measure aimed to distract the torpedoes away from us. One was successful. The one that got through to us though exploded upon impact against the rear- most engine casing. Non-nuclear, thank God. We certainly felt the results of the explosion, however for the most part the ship was unharmed.

Again the lights dimmed. This time it was because of the broadside fire of the starboard Plaser Guns located along the side of the ship's hull. Sixteen of the high powered, laser assisted charges of raw plasma streaked across the twelve hundred kilometer gulf between us

and them, striking them across their starboard fore beam.

The Devil's Hammer's hull cracked open and men and machinery were suddenly expelled from the breech. Life pods littered the immediate area. With the majority of them empty due to their crew not having enough time to fill them, *The Fury* rescued several survivors.

Hours later, those survivors were placed into a cargo hold and each one, seventy three in all, were interviewed by the captain himself. He had me witness the event from an observation room located next door. I couldn't hear the words, but I could see results. Some of the men and women left the interview through a different door other than the one they had entered. Some of them returned to the cargo hold.

The ones dismissed to the other door were taken into another room where I lost track of them. The ones who returned to the cargo bay, stood around waiting for whatever was to happen next.

One prisoner seemed to grab Tobias's attention. He had spent a long time talking with him and the two looked as if they were long lost buddies. They left the room together through the other door.

About fifteen minutes after the last interview was conducted, all of the men that were guarding the prisoners left the cargo bay. The captain, who had joined me in the observation room, looked at me. Gone was the pleasant disposition that up until now was a hall mark of *this* captain. His gaze was icy cold.

"I am not always like this you know. When it comes to my trade, I am deadly serious. I wanted you with me while I decided the fate of my enemies." he said in a low even tone. I saw regret in his eyes. "Raymond, the ones that left through that door decided that they wanted to join my crew. They are going to be thoroughly question even more by specialist that I have among my crew.

The others, well they are about to meet their makers. They are unaware of course. They were told that they will be processed and held in our brig. I think it is more humane to be taken without warning. But I

don't take any pleasure in this."

He touched a button on his wicom, "Open it."

In the monitor that was set into the wall, the screen displayed the approximately fifty pirates that had refused to join the crew. I saw the floor open and the men were swept out into the void. Almost instantly- they were dead.

I didn't even realize that I was screaming.

TWENTY ONE

“How could you kill them?” I screamed. The shock of seeing so many people die tore through my very soul. I struck him several times on his chest leaving no imprint upon his well-padded body. He grabbed my arm in mid swing and held me, looking at me eye to eye.

“Make no mistake boy! I am not a very nice man! I am not your friend!” he said as he pushed me down into a chair and released me. Then in a much calmer voice he continued, “I am not the monster you think I am. Those pirates were responsible for many bad things within the Solar Alliance. I have shown mercy to those who accepted my offer to join my crew, but the ones who refused; they would never have changed their loyalties. It was their choice!”

A short time later, Mike, Sonja and I were in the gym. I told them of what I had just witnessed, the mass murder of those people. No, they were not innocent I am sure, but they deserved to be tried in a court of law, not by another, lone pirate.

“That’s horrible!” Sonja said. “I am sorry you had to witness that.”

“It’s a shame too. I was really beginning to like the guy.” Mike replied. “I was even thinking about signing on with him.”

“No!” Sonja and I spoke at the same time.

“Even though there are some likeable things about the guy, deep down he is still a pirate.” I told him. “We don’t even know if he is the real Blackbeard, for goodness sake! You don’t need to get involved with that kind of life.”

“Mike,” Sonja added, “Raymond is right. You don’t want to join with any pirate organization. You have too good of a head on your shoulders.”

“I didn’t say I was!” Mike let the barbell he had been working out with, fall on to its stand. “All I said was that I liked the guy! I find him to be very intriguing person.”

“I like you all as well.” Tobias said as he stood at the doorway. “But they are right Michael; you don’t want to get involved in this lifestyle. It’s a very lonely and hard way to live. The men and women who have signed on with my organization knew that going in and they felt that they wanted to have the freedom that being an outlaw can give; things like not being subject to anyone’s law or government. But it is also a cage. You cannot show your face in public openly.

“You know,” the pirate continued as he sat down on a nearby bench, “I could not even attend my own aunt’s funeral because of who I am. She had raised me ever since my own folks died when I was just a pup. I regret that.”

“I am sorry captain,” Sonja said. “You know, it was your own choice to live the way that you do.”

“I know that girlie!” Tobias roared.

Sonja moved to stand behind Mike, who was already behind me.

“I know.” He repeated softly.

He suddenly changed his somber mood.

“I would like for you to meet my first mate who just returning from an assignment for me. He has returned now and is anxious to meet you- one person especially. Mr. Kincaid, come and join us please!” he said to someone in the passageway.

I looked up and saw the last prisoner that the captain had interviewed in the interrogation room.

“You’re dead!” Sonja screamed and then passed out.

TWENTY TWO

Moments later, Sonja regained consciousness. “Sonja, my dear Sonja.” the pirate said as he stood over us. “I never intended to upset you.”

“Daddy, is it really you? Are you really alive?” Sonja said as she rose to her feet.

Her father had been missing for several years, presumed killed in a pirate attack which completely destroyed the freighter on which he was a crew member. She had told me there were no survivors. That was the reason why she and her mother had come to Europa in the first place; to start a new life, and to fulfill her father’s dream of having his family together again on the colony.

“Aye, it is me sweetheart.” the man said as he reached out to embrace his daughter.

“But why daddy? Why would you let mom and I believe that you were dead all these years?” Sonja said as she stepped back and wiped away tears.

“Oh baby girl, I wanted to contact you and yer mother but, I thought it would be better for you to think I was dead instead of becoming a pirate.” he said. “It be a long story luv-”

“We’ve got time.” Sonja shot back.

Mr. Kincaid sat down near the captain and continued, “We were indeed attacked! Me ship was destroyed and I and a dozen of me shipmates were taken by a pirate named Moondog. He held us captive for several months aboard his ship, *The Diana’s Vengeance* while they

tortured us till finally he pressed us to join his crew.” Mr. Kincaid’s bearded face could not hide the painful emotions that he was feeling.

“For over a year, I and me shipmates labored for that lunatic Moondog, till one day he came upon *The Fury*. I’ll let you guess who won.” He briefly looked at Tobias with a smile, “The capt’n here found us and decided to take us on board an’ to let us join his crew. He told me that someone was preying on large ships and taking kids to be slaves; all while using his reputation to strike fear into their victims. He was going to find out who and destroy them. Moondog was one of the pirate captains involved.

“After about a week of knowing this man,” he indicated Captain Tobias Jones, “I knew that for being a pirate scoundrel, he was actually a good guy. He had a code of honor and a good deal of courage. That is why each of us, his crewmates, feel good about being one of his men—even if he wears that costume.” he concluded with a grin. The captain was also wearing a grin. It was easy to see that Captain Jones took some ribbing from his crew over his choice of wardrobe.

The soft chuckle from everyone lightened the mood in the room. “I wear the costume because I am a big fan of the swashbuckling pirate videos from the early twentieth century!” Blackbeard said.

“Besides it is my ship and I can wear whatever I like!”

Sonja ran out of the room.

“Sonja! Come back!” Mr. Kincaid yelled after her. As he rose to his feet, the captain grabbed his arm, silently telling him to let Sonja go.

I too ran out and pursued her till she reached her assigned quarters. The door slammed.

“Sonja?” I said as I cracked the door a little.

“Go away!”

“No, I won’t.” I said gently. I entered the semi-darkened room and sat down on the side of her bed. I could see her lying on the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

“Why didn’t he let us know?” she said, her voice muffled by the pillow. “Raymond, how could he let us go on thinking that he had died?”

“I don’t know Sonja. I don’t know.” I said as I gently rubbed her back till she fell asleep. I then left her room and went to mine.

TWENTY THREE

Early the next day, Captain Jones called me to his office. He was sitting behind his desk. His face had an expression that is hard to describe. I knew that whatever the topic of our conversation was going to be, it would be very serious.

“Raymond,” he began, “have a seat. To begin with, I would like to apologize to you for making you witness the execution of all of those pirates yesterday. I should not have had you there.”

“Up until that moment, I was beginning to think the newshounds were wrong about you. I had really started to like you.” I replied.

“Hey, they were only pirates.”

“They were people!” I shouted. “Besides, you are *only* a pirate too! Or had that slipped your mind?”

He glared at me for nearly a full minute. I thought to myself that I had crossed a fine line. His eyes bore a hole into me. But I was not going to let that stop me from saying what was on my mind. I wasn’t going to let him know how much he was intimidating me.

“Over the past week since you and your friends have been aboard my vessel, have you not wondered why I have taken an interest in you particularly?” he asked. “Have you not wondered why I brought you aboard in the first place?”

I sat back in my chair, somewhat surprised at the abrupt change in the conversation. “I assume that it was so you could have some sort of leverage over my father, you know-like a hostage or something.” I said.

“No. That is not why.” he said with a slight laugh. He got up and walked around his desk and stared out onto the bridge through the glass doors. I turned my chair around slightly to face his back.

Then without turning from the glass door, he continued. “Tell me Raymond, what is your mother’s maiden name?”

“Jones.” I replied. I wondered what mom’s maiden name had to do with any-...

“Now wait one minute!” I said, reaching an epiphany. “If you are going to tell me that we are related...”

He turned around. “That’s correct Raymond. She is my baby sister.”

I was stunned. Never had the thought ever occurred to me! How could I be related to a man of such evil?

“What I am about to tell you must stay on this ship.” he began. “The man who is impersonating me is my twin brother, Gregory. Your mother is our baby sister.” he said.

“Our mother, your grandmother, died giving birth to her. Your grandfather took her death really hard and in his overwhelming grief, he abandoned the three of us and signed on with a pirate ship- just to get away; the rotten bastard.”

“As the years went by, we learned that he had died onboard that ship when it was destroyed during a fight between them and another pirate named Jupiter Russell.”

He returned to his seat while the silence of the room grew in intensity. Very faintly I could hear the air circulation fans in the ceiling working.

“My father...?”

“He knows the entire story.” my new found uncle said.

“He knows?” I repeated, my mind was fast approaching overload.

“The three of us were roommates at the Space Force Academy

on Luna. We were all good friends too.”

“You mean both you and your brother were at the Academy with my father?” I asked. “How is it that my dad decided to stay in the military and you and your brother did not?”

“Oh but you are wrong. All three of us became highly decorated officers in Space Force. Only Greg and I were assigned to Department Ten, also known as Department X, specializing in undercover operations.

“Raymond, I am not really a pirate by strict definition. I am what you would call a privateer.” he told me. “I hold a letter of marque and reprisal from the Prime Minister of the United Solar Alliance himself, empowering me to infiltrate pirate gangs of the Syndicate and to help take them down while posing as one of them. Gregory did too; till he decided to become a real pirate. So he went rouge.

“My persona of being a modern day Blackbeard, costume and all; was successful. So successful, that my brother decided to steal it from me. With his advanced military training and the backing of the Syndicate; he, while pretending to be me, gained a reputation for being violent and bloodthirsty.”

“Unfortunately,” Tobias Jones continued, “the Syndicate is a massive organization, consisting of other pirate ships, their crews and even legitimate corporations that secretly help fund the Project. My brother’s goal is to be the greatest dictator that ever lived. He wants to over throw the United Solar Alliance and replace it with his own government. And on top of all that; he wants the secrets of zero point generation as well. Zero point generation is a power source even greater than the sun and is the key to intergalactic travel!”

Now I don’t know about the two of you, but my mind had to come to terms with everything that I have just been told. Imagine guys, if everyone had to live under the rule of a despot like Gregory Jones!

“Captain?” a voice from the intercom said.

“Yes?” Blackbeard replied.

“There is a ship approaching, sir. It has a Space Force transponder.”

“Battlestations!” Blackbeard said.

TWENTY FOUR

“Mr. Guthridge?” Blackbeard said as he walked onto the bridge.

“No hail from them yet captain!” Mr. Guthridge said.

“What do those bastards want this time?” Tobias wondered out loud. Though he seemed to be calm and cool on the outside, I knew that he was nervous.

“Ahoy unidentified vessel! Stand too and prepare to be boarded! This is the United Solar Alliance frigate *Invincible* to unidentified pirate vessel, stand too and prepare to be boarded!” A female voice was heard through the bridge’s sound system. I could see the captain relax even though no one else would have noticed.

“Mr. Kincaid stand down from battlestations and go to condition yellow.” The captain ordered. “Mr. Guthridge, acknowledge their orders. Bring us about Mr. Grimes and prepare us for visitors! Children,” he said turning to us, “follow me.”

We followed him down to the same room where we had first come aboard the *Fury*. By the time we arrived, the two ships had already begun to dock. The three of us stood behind the captain and some of his officers.

While the airlock cycled through, some of the crew members armed themselves with their hand plasers, with two of them opting for plaser rifles. All of them aimed at the airlock as the door started to open.

Commander Brian Toliver emerged from the hatchway. He was an ideal model of what an officer should be. Tall with broad shoulders,

he was a middle aged man of mixed heritage and a lifelong Space Force officer.

Immediately behind him was a very familiar person to me. My dad.

“Stand down and dismissed!” the captain ordered his crew.

“Captain, permission to come aboard.” the commander said as the armed men exited the room.

“Permission granted, commander. Welcome aboard the *Fury*.” Tobias smiled, returning the salute. “You can’t be too cautious these days.” he said indicating the guards who were leaving the room. “Sorry Tony.”

“No problem Toby. If I were in your line of work, I’d be cautious as well.” My father said to the captain.

Turning to me he said, “Hello son.” He looked older to me somehow, though I had only been gone for a little over one month. “Are you alright?” he asked, giving me a hug.

“Yeah, I’m okay. So are Mike and Sonja.” I told him, indicating my friends standing quietly in the background. He waved at them and we all hugged each other.

“Your mother and Becky are worried sick about you. I told her you would be okay, but you know how your mother is.” he said as we walked out into the hallway. “When you disappeared from the station, your mother and I freaked. I pulled a few strings and twisted the captain’s arm to let me come with her to look for you, Admiral Coleman wasn’t very pleased but he didn’t stop me. I also urged Tobias here to see if he could intercept the *Galloway* so you wouldn’t have to go all the way to the Belt.” The captain and the commander escorted us to the officer’s mess where we all sat down to cups of steaming hot coffee.

TWENTY FIVE

The three of us briefed my father on what had been happening with us since the day we stowed away onboard the *Galloway*, each of us taking turns with different parts of the story. We also told him of how we came to be on the *Fury*.

The captain recounted the story of our encounter with the *Devil's Hammer*. Neither he nor I mentioned the summary execution of those pirates though. I think, by the glances they gave one another, my father already knew what had happened.

"Thanks for retrieving my son Toby." my dad said to Captain Jones.

"No problem Tony." Blackbeard replied. "He is a great kid. By the way, he knows the whole story."

"The whole-" my dad began. "Why did you tell him?"

"He had a right to know!" the pirate slammed his mug down with a force that could have cracked the table. His eyes were like flame as he stared at my father. My dad met his gaze with equal intensity. "I told you that this day would come, and so it did!"

Then my father changed his attitude and said, "I suppose he was bound to find out sooner or later." He sat his own mug down on the table before him. He looked at me. "Well? Anything to say now that you know you are the nephew of one of the most notorious men of the twenty- second century?"

Immediately, Mike and Sonja both looked at me as if I had suddenly grew a third eyeball on my forehead.

“I was going to tell you guys later.” I said to them.

To my dad I said, “I understand. I was very surprised, obviously- but I understand.”

“I don’t!” Mike said.

“Nor I!” Sonja chimed in.

So for the next ten minutes I, Captain Jones (or should I say Uncle Tobias) and my father explained.

“The three of you must keep my true status a secret.” Uncle Tobias said. “If you were to tell someone and word got around that I was a privateer, I would certainly be killed. Only a few people other than those onboard this ship knows. Your father is one of those men. Now so are you three. Can you handle it?”

The three of us nodded our heads, almost as if we were one entity.

“Sorry about intruding Capt’n, but there is a message on the com for Commander Toliver.” Mr. Guthridge’s voice said via the ship’s intercom.

“Pipe it through to this room John.” Captain Jones said.

“Very well sir. Go ahead sir.”

“Commander- Long range scans are showing a large warship headed this way, and it is not one of ours.” a voice said from the speakers.

“Acknowledged.” Commander Toliver said.

Captain Tobias Jones stood up and walked over to a panel on the wall. He pressed a button and began to give orders. “Mr. Kincaid, begin emergency separation from the frigate! Retract the docking tube on my order. Then back us off a kilometer from the *Invincible*.”

“Captain!” my dad said. “We have to get back to our ship!”

“I know Tony, Hurry.” To me he said, “Raymond, my boy, be good. We will talk some more another time.”

“Goodbye Uncle Tobias. It’s been interesting.” I said, shaking

his hand.

We left the ship and boarded the *Invincible*, a spanking new, thirty two gun light cruiser, a prime example of the latest in warship technology. She had thirty-two high- yield plaser banks, twelve rail guns, and twelve torp tubes. Only a true capital ship had more fire power.

Captain Marsha Law met us at the other end of the docking tube. At six feet three inches, she towered over most of her crew. An Amazon by anyone's standards, she almost looked like a super heroine or an athlete. She possessed a stunning beauty that was every teenage boy's dream.

"Commanders! Good to see you back." she said to my father and Commander Toliver. "I want you on the bridge with me. I'll have one of my crew show the kids to their guest bunks." she said to us.

"Captain," my father said as we walked, "permission for the kids to join us on the bridge."

"Permission denied." she said.

"Begging the captain's permission, may I whisper something to you in private, Ma'am?" My father asked.

"Alright Commander. But remember you are a married man." She said with a mischievous grin on her face.

The two talked in a short series of whispers for a few moments as we walked. We entered into an elevator. When the doors closed she turned to me,

"Your father tells me that you want to follow in his footsteps. He also says that you were one of the ones responsible for rescuing the passengers and crew of the *Sovereign of the Sky*."

"Yes Ma'am." I said.

She looked at me as if she was sizing me up for a new suit. After a moment, she sighed and said,

"Alright commander. Raymond, I will authorize you to visit my

bridge but you must stay out of the way and keep your mouth shut unless you are spoken to. Understand?”

I nodded my head and replied, “Yes Ma’am!”

My dad said, “Happy belated birthday son.”

My birthday was two days ago!!! And I forgot about it! Can you believe it Ben? How about you Ronald? Have either of you ever forgot your own birthdays? I am now officially fifteen years old!

Mike and Sonja also wished me a happy birthday as well. I would have loved to have had them join me on the bridge, but Captain Law refused. Mike was not too upset about it in that he had no interest in serving in the military. Sonja however did want to come with me, and was a little upset when the captain said no.

We exited the elevator onto the command deck, walked through the CIC and onto the bridge of the warship. It was very similar to Uncle Tobias’s bridge on the *Fury*, with the only real difference being that this bridge was a little larger and busier. Just like on the pirate ship, there was a sweeping panoramic view of the spacescape. There were also various monitors and the different workstations and a central monitor that was suspended from the ceiling. Upon that main monitor, the image of a large vessel came into focus.

As is the custom with most pirate ships, there was no transponder signal emanating from the approaching vessel. But as it came into view on the main monitor, my dad and I immediately recognized it as the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, Blackbeard’s or should I say Uncle Gregory’s flagship.

TWENTY SIX

“Well now little brother, I am glad you could join us. You even brought me a present!” Gregory Jones said to Uncle Tobias. Though the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* refused to answer our hails, they did answer the *Fury*. Captain Law decided to split the main screen into two with the image of Gregory on the left and the image of Tobias on the right.

“You are only five minutes older than me brother, or did you forget that we are identical twins?” Tobias said to his brother.

“I am reminded of that unpleasant fact every time I look in the mirror.” Gregory responded. “It has always been you who received all of the glory, won all of the awards...But, no hard feelings though. I want you to join me. Right now the entire solar system fears me! Or should I say us? Since I am really just playing the part you created. No one even knows about me, your older brother. Or if they do they think I died a long time ago when Tony nearly killed me in that fight on Callisto. If I ever catch up to him again I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” my father said. “Kill me?”

“You’re aboard the Space Force ship?” Gregory asked, acknowledging our existence for the first time during this encounter.

“Yes, I am.” he replied. “Face it Greg, you lost that fight. And it is silly for you to bring it up now!”

“I loved her Tony. And you killed her.” Uncle Greg had a faraway look in his eyes.

“I understand your grief Gregory,” my father said, “but that was

a long time ago. She was a part of that pirate crew. I wish that it hadn't happened, but..."

"No!" Greg cried. "You will pay for taking her away from me!" he shouted.

He turned his attention to someone on board his bridge and gave them some orders. The *Queen Anne's Revenge*, which until now was drifting several kilometers away, came to life and brought its port guns to bear.

"Captain Jones," Captain Law broke into the conversation, "I am Captain Law of the Space Force warship *Invincible*. Fire any weapon upon us and we will destroy you! Stand down and prepare to be boarded!"

"Greg, don't fire, my brother!" Tobias pleaded. "Don't fire your weapons at them or I will be forced to fire on you!"

"You would fire upon your own brother?" Gregory said to the real Blackbeard. "Your own identical twin brother?"

"If I had too." Tobias Jones replied.

"Then so be it!"

A broadside of plaser energy burst forth from the rouge pirate vessel. While many of the blast streams made contact with the outer hull of the *Invincible*, little real damage had been incurred. The hulls of all Space Force warships are made with four layers of an Iridium/Titanium compound that is nearly indestructible.

Captain Tobias Jones fired his rail guns at his brother's ship, striking it mid ship. At the same moment, the *Invincible* fired two nuclear torpedoes, missing the pirate ship by mere meters. They detonated several kilometers past the ship.

"Captain," a lieutenant said, "We've got a problem!"

"What is it?" Law asked.

"There is a hostage situation on the hanger deck, ma'am. It seems that a new crewmember that rotated in at Europa has taken

several hostages. He is demanding that Commander Rodriguez and his son be brought to him immediately or else he will kill them.”

My father and I looked at each other, both of us knowing who it was that was demanding their presence.

“But it can’t be!” I said.

“We were wondering what happened to him.” My dad replied. “Zach said that he had wounded him, but he still managed to get away.”

“Can either of you two gentlemen enlighten me?” Captain Law asked looking at first to my dad and then at me. Quickly, we explained about our run in with Rene Robinson on Europa station.

TWENTY SEVEN

Commander Brian Toliver led the way through the corridors to the hanger deck where we found Rene with Mike, Sonja and Chief Petty Officer Swan. Having been backed into a corner, he had a plaser rifle pointed directly at the head of his son, and a plaser pistol trained on Sonja. Several Space Force Marines had their rifles pointed at him.

Commander Toliver stood in front of the marines with the intention of talking the rouge spaceman out of killing anyone and giving himself up.

“Why are you doing this?” the commander asked. “You’ve got to know that there is no place to run.”

My father and I waited behind a support pylon while the commander did his best to get Rene to see reason.

The lights dimmed for a second while the captain fired a broadside in the battle raging outside. So far we had yet to receive a serious direct hit, but how long that was going to last was anyone’s guess.

“I will not say this again! I want Commander Rodriguez and his son, Raymond,” Rene shouted, “standing here before me in the next sixty seconds and a shuttle prepped and waiting on the launch pad or I will kill Mike! Next will be the girl! Just in case you weren’t aware of this, Mike is my own son! That should give you an indication of just how serious I am!”

Rene was a desperate man. Why he wanted us, I was not totally sure. The only information that we knew that he didn’t was what that

the man who died in my arms on Europa had said- Space Force had destroyed the *Sovereign of the Sky*.

“Rene!” my father shouted as he stepped away from the pylon.
“I am here! Put the weapons down and we will talk about this.”

“You must think that I am a fool, commander. Where is that boy of yours?”

My dad began to say, “He’s-”

I drew a big breath and summoned all of the courage I had within me and said as I walked out from behind the pylon, “Right here!”

“Alright. Both of you walk over this way, slowly! Remember, no tricks. I still have my guns pointed at these other trouble makers.”

We walked towards him with our hands up in the air. As we walked, we felt a slight tremble through the deck plating, the effect of a direct hit to some part of the ship by Uncle Gregory.

When we were all together as a group, he handcuffed each of us while using our bodies as human shields against the marines who were ready to blow him away.

“Now about that shuttle?” he shouted at Commander Toliver.

“It is on pad C and it is waiting for you!” he said.

Rene ordered us to march to pad C. On the way, the marines marched with us, waiting for a chance to overtake the gunman. I was nervous as he had us form a diamond shape group, you know- one person in front one on the left side, one on the right and one behind him as we marched. Rene of course was in the middle.

As Sonja, who was in front of our diamond, stepped onto the ramp to the shuttle’s interior, an exceptionally strong jolt as a result from the battle being waged outside struck and the lights went out. In the few seconds that followed before the emergency lighting came on, a couple of things happened.

First the artificial gravity produced by the gravplates beneath our feet stopped working. All of us in the shuttle bay became weightless.

That includes the shuttle itself.

Second, C.P.O. Swan (who formed the rear of our diamond) and I both pushed off and away from Rene so that the marines who had been tailing us could get there shot when the lights came back on. Dad, who was on the opposite side from me, dove forward, trying to hit the deck but ended up ‘flying’ up and into the shuttle’s main cabin. Sonja ended up inside the shuttle also. So did Rene.

As for the shuttle, it landed with a loud thud as it hit the deck when the gravity returned. The forward landing pad snapped off like a pencil, throwing the entire vessel into a lopsided position. Picking myself up off of the floor, I realized that Rene was about to fire up the main thrusters.

“Out! Everyone get out now!” I cried as I realized what the noise was that could be heard emanating from the craft. The doors to the shuttle bay were still closed and the large room was still pressurized. I knew that if he fired the engine the shuttle would crash through the door, and we would all be sucked out into the void of space.

As the engine ignited, I made it inside the airlock and managed to close the door just as the vessel broke through the giant doors of the bay. I did not know that C.P.O. Swan was still behind me until after I had locked the door. He had held on to the door frame for several seconds as the atmosphere vacated the compartment, and I could see the swelling of his face and the look of fear in his eyes. I desperately tried to open the airlock up again but the controls would not respond. Then suddenly a look of utter peace appeared on his face. He knew that he was dead, and so, let go of his handhold.

I watched as he was swept outside along with all of the other loose objects that just happened to be in that bay. As I watched, I wondered if that is all that we really were; just things to get swept away after we have finished our duties? I have seen too much death lately. The pirates aboard the *Sovereign*, the ones aboard the *Fury*, that

stranger at Pizza Tony's ...Sara- Sara's was the one that hit closest to home. Standing at the window with tears running down my face, I realized just how precious life is, and also how fleeting it can be. How could Mike ever think about throwing it away! No matter what kinda hard time he was having at coping with life, it is only temporary. Death is permanent.

I turned away as the shuttle maneuvered and fired its main engines, taking with it my father and the girl I have come to care about. Mike saw the tears on my face and hugged me.

"Be strong my friend, we will get them back." he told me.

"I hope so." I replied. "I really hope so."

TWENTY EIGHT

Captain Law was sitting at her Captain's station processing the battle information that flew across her screen. The damage reports said that they had been hit in the aft starboard quarter just below the fantail. An auxiliary fusion reactor lies under it but it was not damaged and posed no threat to the entire ship.

From my vantage point behind her station I could see the shuttle as it made its way to the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. I could also see Uncle Tobias's ship, the *Fury*, spewing out smoke from a damaged portion of the ship. Emergency robots were already on the hull working to repair the damage that had been done.

"Captain!" a lieutenant shouted. "We have Incoming!"

"Thank you Lieutenant Palmer. Evasive maneuvers Mr. Williams!"

The world was rocked by explosions throughout the ship from the nuclear torpedo strike. All electronic components died including the grav-plating. We were helpless. The plaser broadside that followed caused even more damage. The next one to follow would surely have killed us if the *Fury* had not interceded.

Uncle Tobias had maneuvered his ship between us and the *Queen Anne*, effectively shielding us from the deadly energy blasts. He returned fire striking the now fleeing *Queen Anne's* rear port quarter just below the auxiliary engine.

However, there was a terrible explosion of light that flared in the spot where the *Fury* was last seen. When it had dissipated the

mighty *Fury* was gone. There was no debris as one would expect from an explosion. There was nothing at all.

Though the crew of the *Invincible* and the *Fury* fought bravely, the *Queen Anne's Revenge* managed to escape, taking my father and my friend with it. 'Don't worry Sonja and Dad, I will rescue you.' I said to myself as I watched the pirate ship shrink into the distance as it fled.

As luck would have it, because of the loss of gravity, there were few serious injuries to the crew. I can't say that about the electronic hardware components though. After we regained power, we learned that several key systems had overloaded including the targeting computers, and the maneuvering engines. It would take a few days to make repairs.

"Did the *Fury* explode?" I asked during a quiet moment on the bridge.

The captain turned her head and looked at me. I had forgotten that I was only there by her good graces. For a moment, I thought that she was going to order me off the bridge or thrown into the brig. But she softened her countenance- probably remembering that my father and closest friend had just been kidnapped.

"I don't know." she answered softly. After a few moments she asked me, "Are you still sure you want to serve in Space Force?"

For a moment I said nothing. Did I really want to spend my life watching people die? Or killing pirates? Were the moral ideals that my father instilled in me worth the price? Or for that matter was truth and justice simply an illusion? A show staged by some cosmic puppeteer?

Then I thought; someone has to oppose the forces of darkness. Evil wins when good people don't come against it.

Then again, maybe I am just crazy.

"Yes." I answered. "I have always believed that one day I would make a difference in our solar system. There are bad people out there who, if they get their way would destroy our way of life and the freedoms we all enjoy. I want to play my part in the defense of those

freedoms. I want to be on the front lines in that fight. There is no other place I'd rather be."

She looked at me for a moment and said, "You know... I believe you. You have a knack for being where the action is, just like your father. And I sense a good, moral character and strong leadership abilities in you."

'Really?' I thought. But I said, "In light of what I have learned about my family, I feel that I need to balance the cosmic scales, you know, between good and evil? "Uncle Gregory is defiantly one of the most evil men of our time. I know he is into child sex slavery, racketeering and corruption of governments and probably a lot of other things I have no knowledge of.

"And while I am not quite sure of Uncle Tobias, I sort of think that he was basically good..."

"Don't let him fool you!" Captain Law interrupted, "He may have been working on our side, but he was just as ruthless and cutthroat as his twin brother. For instance, those men he executed; he should have just detained them and brought them in for trial! By rights- I should've arrested him too! But I am under orders."

Changing the subject, she said, "Raymond, I understand that you just turned fifteen years old. Next year you will be eligible for early admittance to the Space Force Academy on Luna. If you wish, and if your grades are up to it, I will sponsor you. You know, your dad is not allowed to sponsor you himself."

I had only briefly talked with my dad about attending S.F.A. Predictably, he liked the idea of course, but my mom didn't. She had said that it was bad enough having one member of the family in the military. She didn't want to have to worry about me as well.

Well I hate to worry her, but I think it is in my blood. I know she will accept whatever decision I make with regards to Space Force. I only hope that my dad is around to see my dreams happen.

***PARC THREE:
TRIAL BY FIRE***

TWENTY NINE

June 7th, 2185

I stared at the note that was placed in my hands just moments ago. It contained just two words:

HE'S ALIVE!

The “He” could be almost anyone, but in light of where we were, it seemed the writer must be referring to my father, whose casket was just lowered into the soil of Europa.

“This is a cruel joke!” I thought to myself as I looked around to try and spot the woman, who hastily had shoved the folded sheet of paper into my hands and kept on walking. I had thought it might be a card expressing condolence, another of the literally hundreds of other cards and letters received over the past week since word of my father’s death came to light. However among the other people who had gathered for the service, the mystery woman had vanished.

Ten years is a long time. In that time I have attended the Space Force Academy, graduated with honors, received excellent ratings on both manned and drone space fighters and have seen much of the solar system. My first tour of duty had been on the *U.S.A.S. Liberty*, The same ship that originally had come to our aide during the *Sovereign of the Sky* affair. I am now a full Command Line Lieutenant.

My new ship is the *USAS Excalibur*, the newest and fastest

battle cruiser/carrier in the Space Force Fleet! And it was waiting for us at the Mars Shipworks facilities on Phobos after the promotion ceremony. I am very much looking forward to this assignment.

Space Force had been created mostly to provide protection for the millions of colonists that now lived and worked on the many moons and stations in the United Solar System Alliance. Of course the mining operations in the belt were also of great concern, and protection of those assets was also of paramount importance. Trillium Five, an ore that is found mostly among the moons of Saturn as well as in the Belt, is used in the fusion reactors that power most modern space ships. It is just one of the many products that made the outer real estates so valuable.

The Titan Republic on the other hand felt that all of the mining rights should belong to them. Way back in the infancy of the second wave of space colonization, Dr. Karl Wagner, a space pioneer and an exogeologist who had discovered Trillium Five and the refining processes used today, believed that he deserved to have a share of all profits made using T5. Being the wealthiest man in the Solar System at the time, Dr. Wagner had financed the first expeditions to the Saturn system and later founded the original colony there on Titan. He and his followers felt that they were slighted by the Alliance financially and otherwise and decided to secede from them seventy years ago.

At the time of his death six years later, he had become the dictator of Titan. Since then, there have been three other dictators, each being more critical towards the Alliance and its policies than the one before. They also had become more isolationistic in there foreign policies as well. Though their military strength was unknown, it was generally believed that the privateers were engaging in the harassment of trade between the Earth and the Jupiter System or the Belt on the explicit orders of the Titan government. Positioned as they were on the outer most fringes of

populated space, many aspects of their culture were hidden from us.

One thing not hidden to us is the fact that there were roughly three and a half billion people who lived in the Saturn system under the dictatorship of Lord Richard Ross, the handpicked successor of the previous regime.

Titan, and more specifically Wagner City, the seat of government on the largest moon in the entire solar system, has been colonized for nearly a hundred years. Sixty five percent of the Republic's population resides there with the remaining people spread over the more than one hundred other moons in the system. That is not counting the smaller Titan held territories such as Autonoe and certain asteroids in the Belt.

For comparison, the Jovian system has three billion inhabitants; with most living on Europa, Callisto or Ganymede. Another million live in the Belt. Mars is home to about five billion while Earth and Luna have roughly thirteen billion people. It is a crowded solar system we live in!

Once we arrived on Europa, a funeral service was held for my father. It seems that while I was participating in training exercises on Luna, Space Force Command received the charred body of a man wrapped up in the burned remains of a shirt and pants. From the subcom found behind the left ear of the body and the DNA tests from the samples recovered from the corpse's tattered clothes, it was revealed that the body was that of Commander Anthony Rodriguez, my father.

My mom and Becky took the news hard. And while I was physically there to give them support, my mind kept replaying the last time I saw him. I remembered how he gave up his freedom to save the entire crew of the *Invincible*, Captain Marsha Law's legendary ship. The images of my father falling forward along with my friend Sonja still haunt my nightmares from time to time. We never knew what had happened to him or her. I thought that I had dealt with my case of

survivor's guilt a long time ago. But now that old wound has been ripped opened again, made worse by the scrap of paper that I held in my hand.

"What is that?" my mother asked as she and Becky joined me next to the still opened grave.

Hastily I shoved the paper into the front right pocket of my formal Space Force uniform coat.

"It's nothing mom," I lied, "just an old note for an exercise on ship."

"Can't Captain Douglas leave you alone today of all days? I mean really! We just finished burying your father for goodness sakes!" she said. "Maybe I should talk to him..."

"No Ma!" I blurted out. "These are old instructions that I had forgot about. I found them in my pocket just now."

"I see."

Becky, mom and I stood there at the side of the grave and took in the view. We were on the far side of the agricultural dome, a structure that was even larger than the city's dome. From here we enjoyed a spectacular view of Jupiter and several of its moons through the hazy proto atmosphere of Europa. The city of Floyd and its dome can be seen in the distance approximately a sixteen kilometers away.

The other attendees were filing out of the cemetery, getting into the line of black electric cars that were waiting for them along the road. Waiting for us, they stood by and watched as we made our way to the lead car, and the short drive to our home.

"I'm telling you Mike! It was the darnedest thing! The woman came from out of nowhere, handed me the message and then disappeared." I said to my good friend the next day.

"And you have never seen her before in your life?" he asked.

"No."

"And what about the note? Anything odd about it?"

“No nothing that I can see.” I told him.

“Short of scanning it for prints, I haven’t an idea of what to do next. Besides, we ship out next

week for our first full patrol with the entire ship’s complement.”

“‘HE’S ALIVE!’ What could it mean, I wonder?” Mike mumbled to himself as he studied the folded paper, turning it over and over again between his two index fingers before his face. “It obviously is talking about your old man.”

The woman who brought the drinks to our table smiled at me as she refilled our glasses.

“That much I got Sherlock.” I returned, “But if he is alive, then who is it that we just buried in his grave?”

The waitress continued to smile at me and watch us from across the room. She was roughly one point six meters tall and had a very attractive shape. Her face was angelic like and reminded me of someone I used to know. Amie was dead though, killed when the Sovereign of the Sky was destroyed ten years ago. But I swear the girl looked very much like...

“Mike, that girl over there, the waitress. Doesn’t she remind you of Amie?”

Mike turned his head and looked at the girl. After a few seconds, his Asian eyes opened wide as his jaw fell open. My eyes followed his gaze to rest upon the young woman’s face. Her eyes also opened wide with recognition.

“Amie?” we both said at the same time.

“Mike? Raymond?” she responded. She ran the few meters over to our table as we rose to greet her.

“I thought...”

“I never...”

“But you...”

We all tried to talk at the same time. Somehow I was able to be

heard first.

“I thought that you were dead! What happened? How did you survive the disaster?” I asked.

“We very nearly were killed! Captain Bancroft ordered everyone to abandon ship. My parents and I barely made it into one of the lifepods just before the ship blew up. It was horrible Ray! There were explosions everywhere, flames and smoke and...and...” she said. Her eyes started to fill with tears because of the memories we were evoking.

“It’s OK. Amie.” I said.

“We were rescued by the USAS Invincible.”

“I know the ship. We were on it once.” I told her.

“Really? Captain Law was great!” she said. “She took us to Pasiphae Station and from there we returned to Earth. Once we were rescued, I tried to contact you guys but you had disappeared. Anyway, my parents decided to take some dirtside gigs on Earth for a while. About a year ago I decided to come back here to Europa.”

“That must have been when we were on board the Galloway.” I said to Mike.

“So why’d you come back?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know.” she replied. “I think I may have missed the sense of adventure living out here gives you.”

“You are a waitress.” I said.

“Yeah, I know that.” She looked at me. I got the feeling that I said the wrong thing.

“You are forgetting that my parents are pretty well off. I don’t have to work this job while I am at Floyd University you know. I do it because I like working.”

“I am sorry if I offended you” I apologized.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Ms. Covington!” a voice shouted in our direction. “You have an order up!”

“I got to go.” Amie said as she stood up. “We’ll catch up later. I get off at six.” She gave each of us a quick kiss on our cheeks and hurriedly walked into the kitchen. Mike and I just looked at each other, barely believing that our friend was back from the grave.

For the next few hours I thought about the note and how I could pursue this new mystery. Who was the woman that handed me the message? How did she know? Where was my father? Who did we just bury? It seemed to me that my first step was to see if there were any video of the service available.

CHIRCY

As it turned out, there was a security camera that recorded the entire incident. Major Higgins, who was attached to the Chaplin's office, set me up with a monitor and watched with me as we viewed the footage from the funeral service. One by one the various guests walked past me and my family till we came to our mysterious stranger.

"Here is your mystery woman, Lieutenant. As you can see in the enhanced resolution, we can't seem to get a good picture of her face. The dark glasses and wide brimmed hat serves to hinder the computer's ability to identify her."

"So it seems. Sir, is there a way to check if she signed the guest book?"

"That was my first thought when you asked me to look into this," the older gentleman said. He reminded me more of someone's favorite grandfather than a superior officer.

He opened up the old fashioned book that contained the signatures of all of those who attended the funeral. "As you can see there were quite a few people there both Space Force and civilian. I doubt that it will be of much help to you. I was going to send this over to your mother's house later on this afternoon but since you are here now..."

"I'll take it, Sir." I said.

"Very well." he said.

He then looked me square in the face. "Son, what is this about?"

I sat in front of the monitor and watched the scene unfold several times and debated whether to let him in on the mystery.

“I’m not sure just yet, Sir.” I told him.

He looked at me for several seconds before he turned back to the screen. He made no more comments. But I did notice something. The woman had turned her head at one point and I could see a tattoo on the side of her neck. It was very small. However, because of the extreme resolution, I could see a symbol very clearly.

Mike and I hooked up around 5:30 pm and headed for the restaurant to pick up Amie. After a brief stop by her apartment so that she could change clothes, we headed to this new party club that had just opened in the arts district. We ate a light dinner in the dining area and then went down a level to the dance hall. We danced off and on for the next few hours. Around midnight, a guy came over to our table and sat down. It was clear from the start that Amie and he had a history together. He ignored Mike and I and started to talk with Amie.

“So Amie, how are you doing?” he began. “I see that you are now scraping the bottom of the barrel for companionship.”

“Bret, why are you here? Does your mommy know where you are?” she said, mocking him.

“Amie, is everything okay?” I asked.

“Look, soldier boy, this is between her and me! Just stay out of it!” It was clear that he had been drinking and had had more than enough already.

“It’s alright Ray, I can handle Mister “I Love You But Only If You Sleep With Me.”

“Come on Amie; that is not true. I only thought...”

“You thought that you would try to sweet talk me into sleeping with you! Just one more conquered wench. That is until you moved on to your next one!” she said with the ferocity of an attacking tiger.

“I think it is time for you to leave.”

Mike said as he stood up, placing a hand on Bret’s left shoulder.

“I said stay out...” Bret began while throwing a punch into Mike’s midsection.

Needless to say, Bret hurt his hand on Michael’s six pack abs. Mike just looked at him with a diabolical grin on his face.

“My rather large friend there hasn’t had his workout at the gym today,” I said to Bret. “He hates to miss his time with the punching bag. If I were you, I’d be praying very hard that he doesn’t decide to use you as a stand in.”

Bret did not say another word as he looked at me and then back at Mike. Like a little child that had been told to go to his room, the intoxicated man turned on his heel and stormed off, leaving the building.

“So what’s his story?” I asked Amie. She ignored my question at first, turning her attention to Mike.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I am fine.” Mike said.

Turning to me she said, “He and I dated for about a month. The more I got to know him, the more I knew I didn’t want to “know” him. His parents are friends with my parents so of course they thought it would be nice to have their two children get together, you know? Well it didn’t work out obviously. He kept pressuring me to sleep with him.” she said while starring a hole into the table.

“He didn’t get, you know, violent or anything, did he?” I asked.

“No, well he did slap me once.”

At that, Mike got up, intent on going after him.

“Mike! It’s over! Don’t go after him! I am alright.” Amie said, “Let’s just enjoy the rest of the evening.”

And we did just that until we walked her home at four the

next morning.

“Certainly not!” Commander West said when I asked for an extended leave of absence a few days later. “Lieutenant, need I remind you that the only reason you were able to attend your father’s funeral and have the last two weeks on stand down was because the Excalibur had to come to Europa anyway to take on the rest of our crew? This is a warship, not your personal yacht and you are an officer in the United Solar System Alliance Space Force!”

“Yes Sir!” I said to the first officer. All official requests from the line officers had to go through the X.O., a short blond man in whose office I stood. There were five plaques on the wall behind his desk, each designating one of the five ships to which he had been assigned during his twenty five year career. The Excalibur was his sixth. Only Captain Douglas had more years of service [twenty eight] among the ship’s senior officers. The C.O.B. [Chief of the Boat] had the most out of everyone with forty three years.

“Tomorrow at Oh nine hundred” he continued, “I expect you to be on this ship, ready to resume your duties as a communications officer when we set sail on our first patrol! Do I make myself clear lieutenant?”

“Yes Sir!” I repeated. Master Chief Petty Officer Taylor must have been right outside the door and listening as the first officer chewed me out.

‘Lieutenant.’ he said to me as I exited the room.

“COB.” I nodded my recognition to him as he fell into step with me while I made my way down the corridor to the elevator.

“I couldn’t help from over hearing what he said, Sir.”

“I think the whole ship could hear it!” I said punching a button for the lift.

“Everyone knows that you are working on something Sir. Does it have to do with Tony’s

death?” the COB had served with my father many years ago onboard the America.

“I rather not say.” I told him, preferring to go to my shoebox of a room and sulk for a while. I punched the button for deck eight. COB, who had followed me onto the lift, reached out and pressed stop after the door had closed.

“COB! ” I began.

He cut me off with just a word.

“Son,” he continued, “I can tell that you are up to something. Remember I was your old man’s friend long before you came onto the scene. Hell, I am almost like family! And I have known you all of your twenty two years of life. I know that you are up to something and I want to help, if you will let me.”

His face had the look of worry that any father would have for a son in trouble. I knew that I needed to talk with someone, and I guess that COB was the best one for the job.

I started the elevator again.

“Your right, COB. Come with me to my cabin.” I said. Once there, I told him, “I am thinking about going AWOL.”

“You’re what?” he said with his eyes wide opened and a look of disbelief on his face.

I told him about the note and my suspicions and about the tattoo on the neck of the mysterious woman. When I had finished he scratched his head and said, “Do not go AWOL.”

“But COB, what am I going to do? How am I gonna follow this lead while maintaining my duties here on the ship?”

The middle aged black man looked at me and asked, “Do you even know what that tattoo mean?”

“That is one of the things I am going to find out!”

“Did it look like this?” he asked drawing a symbol onto a scape sheet of paper on my desk. There was a vertical line and a slanted

one at a one hundred and seventy degree angle. That line met another two lines at ten and a twenty degree angles. All of these lines converged at one point on the original horizontal line. At the other end of the one hundred and seventy degree angle line was a circle. Just before the circle were two more lines, one at twenty and the other at twenty five degree angles each.

“Yes! How did you know?” I asked.

He looked at me and nodded his head

“Tattoos on the neck aren’t very common, usually if someone has one then they are involved in the darker side of things. That symbol is the mark of a Pleasure Girl. You know, a sex slave.”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack, Jack. There are only five worlds where that trade still exists *legally*. And they all belong to the Titan Republic.” he said.

“The cemetery’s cameras lost her after she got into a car, immediately after she had handed me the note. When I tracked down that car, its memory had no knowledge of its destination after arriving at the cemetery. It knows that it arrived there that morning and the next thing in its memory is that it was located in Armstrong Park that afternoon.”

“It’s illegal to tamper with a car’s memory.” COB said.

“Well when I track the bad guys down I’ll make sure to remind them of that.” I said with a smile. Then a thought came to me. “COB, how do you know what that symbol meant?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

THIRTY ONE

The Excalibur seemed like a completely different ship now that the ship's full complement of one thousand eight hundred and thirty seven was on board. About three quarters of the crew were either newly enlisted spacemen or academy graduates. The rest were transfers from other vessels or from dirt side or station duties. Each of us was making final preparations for the twelve month patrol due to begin the next day. As for me, I was very excited, though I did feel like I was postponing the hunt for the mystery girl. I knew that COB was right about my staying put and obeying my orders. But somehow I also knew that soon I would find her and get some answers.

"Europa Station reports that we are cleared for departure captain." I reported to the captain.

Captain Douglas nodded to me and then ordered the helmsman to ease us from the station dead slow. When we were about a thousand kilometers from the station, the captain ordered helm to set course for our next destination, 136 Austria.

136 Austria is a small asteroid located in the belt. It is approximately forty kilometers in diameter and serves as a major navigational marker and "rest stop" for ships who are mining the belt. The station has been built into the asteroid itself. There are nearly ten thousand people who inhabit the privately run station. Representatives from all of the major mining companies maintain offices there. The overall governing authority on the station has declared 136 Austria to be a freeport, independent from both the Alliance and the Titan Republic.

It will take us at our normal cruising speed of three quarter power three weeks to reach the station. We could get there in a week and a half if we were at full military thrust, but we are only on a normal patrol.

Our mission is simple: To administer the various laws of the United Solar Alliance, pertinent regulations and policies in a timely, courteous, responsive and professional manner and provide reasonably free, safe, and unobstructed passage for private space traffic while providing military defense against enemies, both foreign and domestic. In other words, we hunt pirates and render aide to ships that might have fallen prey to them. I saw that last situation firsthand a week later.

As I was coming on duty, we received a very faint mayday over the communications console.

“Mister Rodriguez, can you pinpoint the direction and origin of the signal?” the captain asked of me.

“I can have that location for you in just a moment, sir!” My hands flew over the triangulation computer’s interface. It can deduce a location of a transmission’s origin from just a fraction of an arc of space traveled.

“They are located six thousand seven hundred and twelve kilometers at a bearing 130 mark 12 captain.” I said.

“Helm set course heading for those coordinates. Notify Space Force Command of the detour lieutenant.” Captain Douglas ordered.

“Aye, sir!” I replied.

Lieutenant John Hursky, the helmsman, also replied in kind.

Twenty minutes later, the Excalibur approached the sight of the distressed ship. We were on the fringes of the Asteroid belt at just the point where the space rocks began to become numerous. By the hole that was visible on the side of the inverted cargo ship, we knew that it had been struck by pirates. The *Shelly A. Johnson* was drifting near a particularly large rock about a kilometer long. The oblong shaped

asteroid had numerous crevices and craters on its surface, just the sort of place that a pirate vessel might hide.

“Any answer to our hail?”

“No sir.” I replied. “The mayday is automatic.”

“Sound Quarters, lieutenant.” the captain ordered.

I punched a button on my console which in turn activated a loud electronic alarm that pulsed three times followed by a momentary silence, followed by four more pulses. The sequence continued for two minutes. In that time, John had maneuvered the Excalibur to within visual range of the naked eye. I looked over at the forward view port glass of the bridge and saw firsthand the damage made by the marauders. It was obvious that the pirates had blown the docking hatch during the siege. Several of the cargo pods were missing from the vessel.

I was surprised when Commander West chose me to join the boarding party. As a communications officer, I did not know what I had to offer the team, but there I was, suiting up for an armed EVA.

Twenty four of us made our way across the eight hundred meter gulf between the ships including eighteen Space Force Marines. Each of us was armed with plaser rifles and side arms, ready to fight any pirates that may still be on board. The marines entered the doomed vessel first, followed by the rest of us. We were immediately met by three lifeless corpses, floating in the heavily damaged corridor. The artificial gravity was off in this part of the ship, so bodies and body parts, bits and pieces of bulkheads, and equipment floated past us as we made our way to the bridge. It did not appear that any of the forty five men and women survived the onslaught.

Deeper into the bowels of the ship, we discovered the lifeless bodies of two pirates floating just outside of the bridge. I figured the crew must have made a last stand there, defending the most vital area of the entire vessel. When we tried to open the hatch however, we found that we were not able to. An indicator light on the panel next to the door

indicated that the bridge was still pressurized and had working gravplates!

We sent for a portable airlock and before long we gained entry on to the bridge. We removed our helmets and found a young girl with a small toddler. The girl was about ten years old and had been shot in the chest. She was lying unconscious on the deck. The toddler, whom looked to be about three years of age, was sitting beside her, unharmed.

My mind was instantly transported back to another little girl who died nearly eleven years ago. Her name was Sara. She was an innocent bystander, shot by a pirate. I was reminded of how ruthless these people could be. Even my own uncles, identical twins Tobias and Gregory Jones, both of whom had assumed the “Blackbeard” moniker at one time or another, were cold blooded killers.

Ruthless pirates, Uncle Tobias had at least been technically a “good guy”, a privateer, who was working undercover to bring his brother, my uncle Gregory and other pirates to justice. I prayed that I never discover a darkness inside of me as they had. I prayed that it wasn’t a family trait.

A couple of the members of the boarding party administered first aid to the girl and another took charge of the little boy. I was ordered to turn off the mayday signal and search for a log entry of what had happened.

I found the data tube that contained the log first. I hastily placed it into one my suit’s external pockets, and continued to look for the mayday signal’s control. When I found it, I proceeded to turn it off. As the circuit was broken, a voice sounded from the overhead speakers.

“Warning! Five minutes till self destruct!”

We all froze for a moment. Then as if we were acting on cue, we all scrambled to replace our helmets. The crew member, who was

looking after the little boy, placed him inside his own EVA suit. The toddler's body was pressed as close to crew member as possible. It was a somewhat tight fit, but it worked.

The girl however posed a much more difficult challenge. There were no spacesuits in the emergency cabinets that lined the bridge walls. She was too big to share someone else's suit so we

had to think of some other way to get her off the ship fast!

"Does anyone have any ideas?" the commander asked. I could tell that he was desperate to save the girl.

"Two minutes and thirty seconds to self destruct!" the computers voice said.

The other men had already begun to exit through the portable airlock. They had to get as far from the ship as possible before the deadly charges ignited. Our EVA suits fortunately were equipped with small rockets that allowed its user to essentially become a small spaceship.

The Excalibur was made aware of the situation and had already dispatched a small shuttle to retrieve us. John had maneuvered the giant vessel away from the cargo ship to a safe distance. It was going to be a close call even if we didn't have the problem of how to save the little girl.

The spaceman who had the little boy in his suit, exited through the portable airlock.

As I watched them leave, an idea struck me.

"Commander, let's put her in the airlock!" I said.

"Don't be an idiot lieutenant! She doesn't have a space suit!" Commander West yelled.

"I know that sir!" I said as I scooped her up and into my arms. "Trust me sir. I know what I am doing." The med tech that had been tending to her wounds helped me get her through the hatch and into the

airlock. I motioned for her to join her patient inside and told her to stay calm no matter what she may hear and not to exit through the other door till it was safe. I then sealed the door.

I turned to COB and the commander. The three of us were the last ones still on the bridge.

“Gentlemen.” I said as I took out my plaser riffle, “We must blast our way out of here by destroying the frame of the hatch. Then we must go through each of the bulkheads dragging the airlock with us till we can get free of the ship.

COB, I know you have some C4 with you. Sir?” I motioned to the commander.

He looked at me strangely. “Son, this is going to be extremely dangerous! We have

less than two minutes to blast through a half dozen bulkheads!”

“I know sir, I know.” I replied as we spread out around the airlock. The shaped charges was placed in strategic point on the bulkhead of the bridge.. Only a small amount was used.

“Fire in the hole!” COB cried.

Three small explosions made the wall of the bulkhead disintegrate, freeing the airlock from the hatch. We grabbed it as we fired our plasers full force into the bulkheads of the next compartment and the next one after that while at the same time firing our EVA suit’s rockets full tilt.

As we were blasting through the final exterior bulkhead, the self destruct blew. The five of us, (the three of us outside the airlock and the two inside) were thrown through the makeshift exit and out into space. At that point I was knocked unconscious when my head hit the side of the hole. Luckily my helmet did not shatter or even crack.

THIRTY TWO

When I came too, I found myself weightless and all alone in the blackness of the void. My armored EVA suit was still intact, but I was sore all over. I tasted blood in my mouth; a quick check with my tongue told me that I had lost a tooth.

Frantically I looked around for my fellow rescuers but they were nowhere to be found. I was all alone. The chronometer in my suit told me that nearly an hour had passed since the explosion. Of course I had no way of knowing for sure. Even the radio in my suit didn't seem to be working nor my sub dermal transceiver located just under my left earlobe. All Space Force personal has one implanted upon joining. It allows the officer to be tracked if separated from his assigned post. It also allows for communication. I only hope that it was still sending a signal so they could find me.

One thing you notice when you are out there in space was just how 'big' it really was.

The asteroid was high "above" me and it seemed almost close enough for me to reach out and

touch, though I knew it was still many kilometers away. I used the remaining fuel in the EVA Suit to turn myself one hundred and eighty degrees hoping to see the remains of the doomed ship and the Excalibur, but I could not see anything but stars.

Another hour must have passed as I began to give up hope. I had another twenty five minutes of air left according to my heads up display. I began to think of all that I had been through. Was this the way

my life would end? Was there not anything more?

I looked at the oxygen indicator on my HUD once more. It told me that I had only minutes of air left now. I felt a curtain of sleep overwhelm me and I dreamed of my father and of Sonja. What might have been...

A bright light obscured my vision, blinding me by its luminosity. From somewhere far away I heard a voice call my name.

“Raymond! Raymond! Can you hear me?” the voice said to me.

I heard someone moan, and then I felt a bolt of pain shoot through my body radiating from my lungs. A moment later I realized that the person moaning was me. Doc Ransom removed his little pin light from my vision and a couple of moments later my eyesight began to return to normal. I was lying in the sickbay aboard the Excalibur. Naked except for my underwear and a sheet, the doctor and his aide along with the captain, the commander and COB stood around my bed. The smiles they wore told me that I was going to be alright. I had survived.

As it turned out, the shuttle found me just as my air tank became depleted. What seemed to be hours were only a few minutes. The air supply had been penetrated by shrapnel from the explosion.

“You did good work today, Lieutenant.” the commander said. “We are all very proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir.” I replied.

Doc Ransom said, “There is someone who wants to see you.”

A nurse made her way into the cubical and through the small forest of men to stand by my bedside. She held the little girl by her shoulders in front of her.

“Lieutenant, I want you to meet Melody.” the nurse said. “She

wants to thank you for saving her life.”

I looked down at the ten year old girl. She was wearing a hospital gown and I could see the bandages that covered her chest where she'd been shot. The dark haired girl leaned over my bed and placed an arm around me and hugged me as tightly as she could.

“Thank you mister.” she said in a small voice.

“You're welcome Melody.” I replied with a smile on my face. Her gratitude made everything seem worth it.

She released me and just smiled.

As it turned out, the little boy, Tommy, was Melody's brother. Their parents had been officers on board the *Shelly A Johnson*.

In fact, their mother had been the captain.

Captain Douglas said that the data tube they had found in my EVA suit had yielded some information about the attack. It seems that the ship was hauling a load of enriched Trillium Five, the ore that is used in most of the fusion reactors currently found everywhere in the solar system. The pirates had made sure that they had stolen every bit of it from the ship.

However, that was not what the pirates were really after.

According to Melody, they had wanted them.

“Who?” I asked.

“The children.” The captain replied.

“But why?”

“She doesn't know.” the captain said. “According to her there is something that makes the children very special.”

“I wonder why they would want to destroy an entire vessel just to get at them.” I said as I looked at the rumpled shirt of the first officer.

“I don't know, but she said that she was shot while trying to secure that hatch.” he continued. “She says that it was her who had killed the artificial gravity and who vented the rest of the ship's

atmosphere into space. By doing so, she isolated herself from the rest of the vessel, protecting herself and her brother.”

“Smart girl.”COB said.

After everyone else had cleared the room, Captain Douglas pulled up a chair and sat down. He looked at me with a serious look on his face. There was something he had to tell me, something he wasn’t sure of how to say.

“What is it, sir?” I asked, curiosity building up inside of me.

“Son,” he said, “One of the marines found something over there.”

“Oh?” I responded.

He produced a folder and tossed it on to my lap. I picked it up and looked inside.

I found a small picture of me and my entire family. I was about twelve years old when it was taken. Sometime during the years since, then the picture had been folded. Creases were prominent in the photograph as was the ragged edges. I looked at my commanding officer.

“How would this photo end up on board a freighter? Sir?”

“I don’t know.”

“The only person who had this photo was my father.” I said. “He kept it with him at all times.”

“I kind of figured it was something like that.” the captain said.

“As near as we can figure it lieutenant, Tony must have been on that vessel. We know that he wasn’t among the crew members, so that means he must be one of the pirates, even though he is dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know about the note that you received at your father’s funeral service.” he said. “I never knew your father Raymond,” the captain continued. “But I do trust COB and he knew him. From what he tells

me, I would have liked him. This is making it even harder for me to believe that he was among the pirates that raided the Shelly A Johnson.”

“He isn’t a pirate sir.”

“I believe you son, but I must at least look at the possibility.” the captain said.

“Your right sir, but I know that he would not have gone rouge.” I replied.

“I hope you are right.” he replied. With that he stood up and left the room. I again looked at the photo.

“Six years is a long time, I know that you could not have changed that much, dad.” I said to the picture I still held in my hands.

We remained at station keeping for the next few days as a forensic ship was deployed from our facilities on 279 Thule to survey and recover most of what was left of the Shelly A. Johnson. We continued to provide security while the U.S.A.S. Horton continued to sift through the debris field, searching for clues as to who the culprit were.

A few days after I resumed my duty schedule, I received a message in that morning’s flash data burst. It was from Mike telling me that he and Amie had become an item. He seemed to be really happy with the new situation. I was very please for them. I knew that Mike had a hard time when it came to relationships. He had always felt –well awkward, you know, kind of not really knowing what to say or how to relate to a woman. Amie seemed to always be a straight forward kind of girl, though I have only really known her for a short time; mostly because we had thought she was dead. It seemed that they were kind of total opposites. But then again, they say that opposites attract. Who knows?

He ended his message by telling me that Charlie had died. Charlie had been one of the kids that were taken prisoner by my cousin,

Mistress Blackwater, on board the Sovereign of the Sky six years ago. It seemed that out of all of us, he was the only one who had an allergic reaction to the drug that she had used to make us sleep through the actual kidnapping of our families and the crew. All of us kids were checked for the drug in our bodies while we were in the hospital. We all carried trace amounts, which we were told was nothing to worry about. With Charlie however, the effects continued till his vital organs began to stop functioning. Oh, they gave him other drugs which drastically counter acted the toxin's effects, but in the end the drugs were not strong enough. He had only been eighteen earth years old; too young to die.

I think about our time in captivity aboard the Sovereign every so often. I also think about the four people, pirates that I myself killed during our attempt to rescue our families and be free. I tell myself that I had no choice; I had to kill them in order to free myself and the other families held by Blackwater. I am angry that she escaped. Now Blackwater and her father, my uncle, are still terrorizing the Solar System, bringing misery to other families who have chosen to live out here among the planets, moons and stations of the *Cosmic Frontier*.

"Lieutenant," the captain said to me when I reported to his ready room. He gestured for me to take a seat. Present in the room was Doctor Ransom, Commander West and Major Russell T. Savage, the leader of the marines on board Excalibur.

"I have included you in this meeting as a courtesy to you Lieutenant. You seem to be connected with our topic on several levels. What we discuss is classified and you are not to speak of it with anyone outside of this office. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir." I replied.

"It turns out that the children DO have something that the pirates wanted."

Captain Douglas said turning towards Doctor Ransom. "Doc?"

“Thank you captain.” the doctor began. “I discovered something peculiar in the blood work I was examining. Upon a closer look I noticed some cells present in both children which had no purpose. As it turned out, those cells were artificial. They contained a message embedded in the DNA. It referred to a Zero Point Engine and how to construct one.”

A million thoughts passed through my mind at the same time with the mention of a ZPE. It was rumored that a prototype had been carried on board the Sovereign of the Sky and that that was the real reason why my Uncle Gregory Jones, disguising himself as his twin brother Tobias, tried to capture the passenger ship. Tobias Jones was really a privateer, whose larger than life persona became legendary; causing others to nickname him Blackbeard after the pirate of the seventeenth century. I became aware of the term “Zero Point Engine” when Rene Robinson had Sonja and I kidnapped and taken to a secret area on board the massive Europa Space station. He had assumed that I had some knowledge about it, which of course, I didn’t. Rene also happened to be Mike’s father and an agent for Gregory Jones who also happen to allied with the Titan Republic.

My Uncle Tobias has not been seen nor heard from since the battle between Invincible and The Queen Anne’s Revenge six years ago. My uncle’s ship, The Fury took some cross fire and exploded, but no wreckage was ever discovered.

Uncle Gregory on the other hand has been very active over the past few years with several terrorist attacks in the Jupiter System and the Asteroid Belt. He has been responsible for the deaths of thousands. His lust for power has driven him to be the worst pirate to ever live. And because he has stolen the identity of Uncle Tobias, both brothers are forever doomed to be remembered as villains.

Zero Point Energy is, as far as I can tell, a process to create an almost unlimited amount of energy from thin air. It has something to do

with alternate universes and channeling power from one universe to ours. Imagine if Gregory was able to obtain that kind of power! The United Solar System Alliance would be in serious danger of collapsing and surrendering to the Titan Republic.

“We can’t let the T.R. get their hands on those kids!” Major Savage stated. “With that type of power at their disposal our entire way of life would be threatened. Lord Ross would be unstoppable!”

“That is obvious, major.” the captain said. “As far as we know, the Titan Republic does not have this technology. It is our job to see that they don’t acquire it.”

Something still bugged me though. “How did the altered DNA cells get into the children’s blood?” I asked.

“We don’t know. Melody says that she and her brother received several injections over the last few months from the ship’s doctor a Doctor Mark Snyder if I am not mistaken. A search through our database presented no evidence of his ever being a member of Space Force or in any service related to our government or any other for that matter.”

Doc Ransom poured himself a cup of tea from the silver tea server that sat on the table before the group.

“Do we know if this Doctor Snyder is affiliated with the Titan Republic?” the XO asked.

“NavIntel doesn’t know. It is possible that someone wanted to smuggle this information to us. We just don’t know. Hell, we can’t even verify the accuracy of the info!” the major said.

“How would the sender even know that it would fall into our hands? I mean, if I had not been as thorough with my examination of the children and if I hadn’t noticed the abnormal cells in their blood work we would not even know about this at all!” Doctor Ransom said.

Another question crossed my mind.

“Why?”

“That is the million credit question now, isn’t it?” the captain replied.

We all looked at the table in momentary silence, contemplating the answer to that question. A zero point generator could be the key to powering a ship to the stars, allowing mankind to colonize the universe. Or it could allow us a way to destroy our entire society. It all depend upon who controlled it.

“I think I know who might have been sent this info to us.” I said. All eyes were on me.

“I know it is a long shot, but hear me out.” I started. “I think that it might have been my dad who smuggled this out to us.”

Immediately I sensed a bit of disbelief in the room. The commander rolled his eyes in clear denial while the doctor just looked at the captain with an opened mouth. The major just looked at me with no expression.

“What if, he has been among the pirates all these years? He came across this information and wanted to make sure that we got it? Somehow he convinced this Doctor Snyder to plant the information in a most unlikely place, the bloodstream of two children.”

My thoughts were racing. “He also made sure that we would know that it was from him because of the picture of my family that was found.”

“Are you saying that he willingly used children for a covert operation?” the captain asked.

“Possibly. Has an autopsy been conducted on anyone else from the Shelly A. Johnson?” I asked the doctor.

“Not yet as far as I know.” Doctor Ransom answered. “The Horton was handling that.”

“Maybe all of the passengers and crew were carrying the plans

in their blood?" I said. They all were staring at me with blank expressions on their faces.

"I think you are really grasping for straws now!" Major Savage said. "Your father was a great man, but he is dead. Get over it."

I ignored the major's comment. I knew in my gut that he was still alive; even more now than I did before we left Europa.

"Captain, why am I here?" I asked. "I mean why am I in this meeting sir? I am just a communications officer. I am not even a senior officer. Yes, I am related to Tobias and Gregory Jones, but other than that, why am I here in this meeting?"

"Lieutenant!" Commander West shouted.

"Commander, it is a fair question." Captain Douglas said, cutting off the stern rebuke the commander was about to unleash on me. "Raymond, you are not on my ship because you are a good officer. You are... but that is not what got you assigned to the Excalibur. It wasn't because of your old man's reputation or even your good looks. Admiral Shanks himself had you assigned to me because he felt you would be useful to our primary mission." He stood up and turned to the large window that displayed the Excalibur's starboard view. Suddenly Captain Douglas looked very old to me, like he had a heavy burden on his shoulder. "We have been sent to chase down and kill Captain Gregory Jones." he said in a quiet voice just louder than a whisper.

The room was silent.

"We are not assassins captain." Doctor Ransom said breaking the silence.

"No we are not. We are Space Force officers and we follow orders!" the captain snapped. He turned around and pointed at me. "You are probably the only one in Space Force who can get close enough to him to take him out. Your orders are to bring him in if you can or otherwise kill him. You think you can handle that son?"

The faces of the four men that I had killed already came into my

mind like a tidal wave that I could not hold back. Each man had a look of fear as they realized that their lives were at an end. I knew that being a part of Space Force, I may be called upon to again take a life someday, but I never thought that it would come so soon. Nor did I think that I would have to kill a member of my own family, my mother's brother, my uncle.

That uncle, however, was one of the most evil men to have ever lived. He alone has killed thousands of people in the Jupiter system, many with his own hands. How could I not be willing to take out a man such as him?

"Yes captain. I can handle the assignment." I said with a firm resolution.

Four days later the captain sent for me to come to his ready room.

"Son, I am pleased to inform you that due to your outstanding conduct as a lieutenant and your quick and decisive, not to mention unique solutions in the field, you have been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, effective immediately. Congratulations Commander!" he said while handing me a small box containing my new uniform insignias.

"But sir," I said to him, "isn't this a little sudden? I mean, I am not due for a promotion for at least another two years."

"Someone at HQ thinks you are ready for it now. And I can't disagree. I think you have earned it. Now your dismissed."

With that, I left.

THIRTY THREE

We finally arrived at 136 Austria the following week. Captain Douglas granted station leave to our entire ship's complement. Of course not all of us went at the same time mind you. We divided into eight groups, each group having a full twenty four hours to enjoy the station's amusements. Lieutenant John Hursky and I were part of the sixth group to go on board the station.

136 Austria had many shops and restaurants. Some of them offered menus for the rich and well to do while others were clearly dives, seedy places where one would not want to be caught dead. It was in one of these places we found ourselves along with about a half dozen other crew members from the ship.

We were enjoying a time delayed Cleveland Indians baseball game against the Luna Legends being beamed almost live from Luna. The Legends were up by three runs in the bottom of the sixth and John, who was born on Luna, was gloating over the imminent victory. Some of the patrons were beginning to get loud and obnoxious, which apparently was normal for The Miner's Hole Bar.

I was just about to go to the restroom when I happened to spot a tattoo on a woman sitting at another table. It looked like the same tattoo that my mystery woman had on her neck. Like her, this tattoo was also on this woman's neck. I knew I had to talk with her. I left to go to the restroom. On my way back, I noticed that there was an empty chair next to her and so I sat down.

“Hello.” I said as I turned to her. She had dark brown hair that flowed down her back and ended between her shoulder blades. Her skirt was black and hung just above her knees. Her blouse, with its modest ‘v’ cut that suggested a hint of the cleavage beneath, was white and she wore a black jacket over it. Her outfit suggested casual business attire, but it had a “come let’s play” quality about it as well.

“Well I can tell you aren’t from around here.” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, you are not an asteroid jockey. Your uniform tells me that you are with Space

Force.” she said with a slight grin on her face.

“Very astute of you Ms...What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ashley.”

“Ashley.” I repeated. “A very lovely name for a very lovely woman.” I said. “Would you mind if I asked you something?”

“Go ahead.” she shouted over the sudden roar of the crowd. The Tribe had scored a triple and suddenly the game was now tied.

“Where did you get that tattoo on your neck?” I asked in a loud voice to be heard over the roaring crowd. Her expression changed and she became visibly uncomfortable.

Unknown to me a rather large man had approached me from behind. He tapped me on my shoulder and as I turned around to face him, my jaw made contact with his fist. Just like that, I was in a bar fight. I dodged the next blow but was able to connect with a few blows of my own. The man was roughly five years older than me and wore a miner’s uniform. I could tell that he had no real training in fighting because of the fact that his stance and technique was all wrong. Because of this, I was not as forceful as I would have been had my opponent been a military enemy or even a pirate.

After a few seconds it seemed that everyone was fighting everyone else. John and the rest of the crew from the ship had joined

the fight when it seemed that other civilians were going to gang up on me as well. By the time that COB and the MPs, who were in the area of the bar, got there and intervened, it seemed that the whole room was in a free for all caged wrestling match.

“What is going on here?” COB shouted in his grumpiest, commanding voice.

John and I stood there in front of the old Master Chief Petty Officer. The two marine MP’s stood just behind us.

“COB, I didn’t...”

“Shut your face boy!” he said to me.

“I out rank you!” I said feeling anger toward my father’s good friend.

“Not here and not now!” he shouted in my face. His nostrils flared. Even though I was a Lieutenant Commander, he had a way to make me feel like I was a raw recruit. I noticed that John too looked as if he was about to face a firing squad. As we were escorted back to the ship, I could see on the holo screen that the Legends had scored a triple of their own.

I also saw Ashley in the background watching me and the rest of the crew from the ship being escorted from the bar.

“Let me see if I got this straight,” Commander West said in a voice that was barely audible. He sat in his chair behind his large desk with his elbows on the desktop. Two fingers from each hand massaged his temples as if he had a migraine. His eyes were closed and his head was down as he said in a quiet voice,

“You asked this woman where she got a tattoo? That is what the fight was about?”

“No sir!” I said while standing at attention. Beside me John

Hursky also stood, starring at the wall behind the Commander.

“The civilian attacked me from behind.”

“Is this true, Lieutenant?”

“Yes sir, commander, sir!” John said as if he was still a cadet at the academy.

“What am I going to do with you two?” the commander said.

“You are supposed to be setting examples for the rest of the crew, especially you, Lieutenant Commander Rodriguez, considering who your father was. Why they ever promoted you I will never know. Already your a disgrace to your father's memory!”

I knew that was coming. All throughout my days at the Academy, I had to compete with my father's ghost. I guess that that is what pushed me to always be the best in all my classes. It is that “bigger than life” hero image that I was always judged by. I loved my father but I swear that he was still making my life difficult. I am not you dad. I have my own life to live. I said to myself as the commander proceeded with reading us the riot act, his voice becoming louder with every sentence. After about ten minutes we were dismissed, sentenced to the confinements of the ship.

“Remind me never to take shore leave with you again, sir.” John said with a grin on his face as we made our way to our cabins. I knew that he was only joking about that, but still I felt guilty about getting him involved in a needless fight. I also felt bad for my other shipmates who received several bruises during the altercation. They at least weren't denied station passes. John and I, because we were the only two officers present were the only ones punished. And to top things off, Cleveland lost the game by one run!

“Hey Raymond! Wait up!” Major Savage yelled towards me one day as I was heading to the galley. He came up behind me and walked with me through the various corridors of the Excalibur. “I never got to congratulate you on your promotion.” he said.

“Thank you sir.” I replied. It was kind of odd that he would be trying so hard to strike up a conversation with me. During the past eight weeks on board Excalibur, he had never even spoken once to me except in that meeting with the captain and the other senior officers the other day.

“I can see that there is a lot of your father in you. If you ever wanted to join the REAL Space Force, let me know. I think my Marine Special Unit (or M. S. U.) could use you.” he said to me.

I wasn’t sure of where he was going with this conversation, but I started to feel uncomfortable.

“Sir, the M. S. U.?” I asked.

“It’s a special project of mine. Don’t worry about it.” he said, but then he added, “It’s just that...well, I think you already have what it takes to become one of us. It’s in your blood, you could say.”

“Major, what are we talking about here?” I asked stopping in front of the gallery’s entrance.

“We’ll talk again.” He said as he continued down the passageway.

Returning to my quarters after a dull duty shift and a quick meal in the galley a few days later, I found a hand written note written on synthetic paper in a sealed envelope attached to my door from Ashley. How it came to be there was anyone’s guess, but I assume that a fellow shipmate placed it there at her request.

In her note she apologized saying that the man whose fists I had become acquainted with was her brother. He had recently helped her escape from her former owner and, being the hothead that he was and more than a little drunk, thought that I was an agent of that man, trying to lure her back into the Company.

She went on to say that the tattoo in question was obtained on Autonoe, a minor moon of Jupiter. Nearly two kilometers in length the oblong moon is known as a Titan Republic stronghold and a destination

for those who are looking for a holiday with gambling and pleasure girls; sort of an Old Las Vegas in space. There were shows to be found there with lots of music, lights and lasers, but most went there for the activities that were very much illegal on Alliance worlds.

As I sat at my desk reading the note, the klaxon sounded, calling all crew members to beat to quarters. My normal duty station during these types of exercises was in the CIC, or the Combat Information Center as it is also known. It is my job to help coordinate internal communications on board Excalibur. Lieutenant Harrison, the senior communications officer and my immediate supervisor, generally handled outside communications.

The CIC is located just aft the bridge and separated from it by a wall of thick glass that parts in half behind the captain's command station. Most of the time during normal ship operations, the room is empty. However, currently the room was filled with twenty two additional personnel, all manning stations. In the middle of the room, suspended from the ceiling, were large monitor screens that relayed all types of combat information in real time. Just below them were holo emitters which provided a 3D image of the Action Zone or "AZ" in militaryspeak. Along the room's sides were desks that faced toward the middle of the combat center.

Upon entering the room I immediately noticed that we were about to cast off all umbilical and tethers, all docking hatches having been secured previously. Captain Douglas explained what was going on. "Earlier this evening, an unidentified ship which we suspect could be the same one that attacked the Shelly Ann Johnson was reported attacking the mining colony on PR45A. That colony falls under Alliance protection. We are ordered to head there immediately to first defend the colony and then (if needed) render aide and humanitarian or evacuation assistance.

"Under full military thrust we should reach the AZ in just under

twelve hours.” the captain said while consulting his wicom. He then looked up at Commander West and said, “XO, spin up the fusion reactors.”

“Aye, Sir!” Commander West replied. Touching the area just behind his left ear activating his personal com unit, the commander said, “Sparky, light the reactors up!”

Commander “Sparky” Stieger was the ship’s chief engineer. He was a heavy set middle aged man who walked with a slight limp, a lingering gift from an accident he had suffered many years ago. His one quirk was that he never left the ship. In fact he has lived on board Excalibur the last two years, even while it was still under construction! And he never leaves it! For example, before we left Luna a few of the senior officers wanted to go out on the town to celebrate our last night in port. No matter what; they were unable to get the commander to leave the ship. Some think that instead of the captain going down with the ship (if that ever happened), our chief engineer would be the one to fulfill that role for us!

Civilian vessels can have anywhere from two to four fusion reactors on board, while military warships can have four to six. The Excalibur, being a Heavy Battle Cruiser/Carrier, has a total of eight. Why so much power? Well to begin with, she has several full batteries of plaser cannons, rail guns, missiles and torpedoes, making her one of the deadliest ships in the Alliance Space Force. We also carried a few hundred fighter spacecraft, both drones and manned fighters and interceptors. (I am rated as an excellent pilot in either type of ship.) In addition to this, the other systems on board the ship are the latest and most advanced designs. We are talking sensors, computers, navigational equipment in fact one might say that Excalibur was the pinnacle of modern military ship design. All of these components require power and lots of it!

Over the following twelve hours, we were at a heightened state of alert, scanning space for the rogue ship. The bridge/CIC personnel were broken up into groups, rotating every four hours. I had just come back from my four hours of down time when the scanners picked up a contact.

“Sir, the ship is moving on a course plus thirty degree’s to the ecliptic plane.” the sensor officer reported.

“Above the ecliptic plane?” Captain Douglas asked. “Now where could he be going in that direction?”

He looked at the commander sitting across the room from him.

“How much time before he leaves the asteroid belt?” the captain inquired, returning his eyes to the young Lieutenant.

“Roughly one hour nine minutes, Sir.”

“Can we catch up to them?”

“Possibly,” John said from the bridge.

The captain was positioned between the two rooms. The glass barrier between the bridge and the CIC was fully opened, making it one big room.

“Very well Mr. Hursky. Pursue.” The captain said.

“Captain,” Commander West said. “What about the mining colony on PR45A? Are we going to abandon them?”

“Of course not commander! But we are going to see if we can capture the bad guys while we can. Bring all reactors to full capacity! Pour it on people! We’ve got ourselves a space race!”

THIRTY FOUR

In general, the level of activity on the bridge/CIC was ramped up a few notches. Everyone on the bridge was anticipating the forthcoming battle. So far, the pirate ship had refused to acknowledge our attempts to hail them, preferring to continue on its course despite the fact that we were gaining on them. The threatboard showed no signs of any other spacecrafts in our vicinity, only the “house” sized rocks known as asteroids that John was able to maneuver around with ease.

The Asteroid Belt is not as densely populated as the movies would have you believe. Though both ships were traveling at high velocities, neither of us collided with anything larger than small rocks about the size of an average shoe, which the navigational shields and the ship’s super tough hulls could easily handle. Captain Douglas ordered two torpedoes fired past the bow of the pirate vessel, set to explode approximately one hundred kilometers ahead of them.

“...Again I repeat, this is the United Solar Alliance Heavy Battle Cruiser Excalibur to the unidentified pirate vessel. Heave too and prepare to be boarded!” Lieutenant Harrison said into her microphone.

Static was the only reply.

“Alright then.” the captain said. “So be it. Commander, take out her engines.”

“Aye, sir.” Commander West said.

“Weaps! Load torpedo tubes three and four with conventional warhead torpedoes. Target their engines only! Fire on my mark!” After a few seconds, he shouted “Mark!”

Instantly, two torpedoes streaked towards the enemy vessel.

“Torps are away sir!” weapons officer Lieutenant Henry Flagstone said. “Tracking is true! Impact in twenty seconds.”

The deadly twin projectiles quickly crossed the two thousand kilometers between the two ships.

“Impact in ten, nine, eight, seven, s-”

As Henry began to say the word “six”, the pirate ship suddenly disappeared.

“What the...?” Captain Douglas said. “Where did it go?”

“Did we kill it?”

“Where is the ship?”

Confusion was in full supply on the ship’s bridge/CIC. None of us had any idea of what had happened.

“The torp’s lost tracking sir!” Henry said. Though the room was air conditioned, he had the shine of perspiration starting to form on his forehead. “They are scanning for another target!”

“Self destruct!” Commander West yelled.

We all expected to see a large explosion, but none came.

“Malfunction Sir!” Henry cried. The sheen of sweat was even more pronounced now, as he desperately tried to hit the button to destroy the wayward missiles.

“Counter measures!” the captain yelled. “Forty degrees down angle to port, Lieutenant!”

“Aye sir!” John replied, his fingers already in motion.

The explosion narrowly missed Excalibur, however the inertia compensators failed momentarily, sending all of us stumbling a few feet toward starboard.

“Report!” the captain shouted.

“All decks reporting no damage, Sir.” I said as I coordinated the messages I received from all over the ship. “I am receiving a message from Sensor Control. They are reporting a massive object registering in

the EVHF band bearing twenty eight degrees to starboard. Range one hundred thousand kilometers!”

“What is it?” the captain asked of no one particularly.

“Maybe a sensor glitch?” the commander offered.

“A natural phenomenon?” someone else chimed in.

Scratching his head the captain gazed out towards the large forward windows of the bridge. “Naw... I don’t think so. I have a hunch that there is something else going on here that is connected to that ship we were chasing. Lieutenant Harrison, open a multiband broadcast please.”

“Go ahead sir.” she replied.

“To the alien object that now occupy the area one hundred thousand kilometers above the ecliptic plane of the asteroid belt. This is the United Solar Alliance Battle Cruiser Excalibur. Please identify yourself and state your intentions.”

The message was replied with only static.

“I repeat, this is the United Solar Alliance Battle Cruiser Excalibur. We are aware of your presence and request that you communicate your intentions!”

For a few seconds the response was the same.

Lieutenant Patel suddenly announced “Threat board contact! Torpedoes bearing oh nine eight one! Nuclear signatures detected!”

“Time to impact?”

“Thirty eight seconds, Sir!” Patel responded.

“Henry! Buckshot defensive rounds! John evasive maneuvers! Now people, now!”

Captain Douglas ordered. Excalibur groaned slightly with the stress of Lieutenant Hursky’s attempt to avoid the missiles heading toward us. Our inertia compensators again failed for a fraction of a second, throwing us around slightly. Due to the captain’s orders and the combined efforts of the bridge crew, the nuclear tipped torpedoes sped

past our ship and detonated harmlessly a short distance to our stern with little debris.

“Bring us to a heading of twenty eight degrees starboard thirty two degrees azimuth. I want to bring our main rails to bear on the area where that ship disappeared.” the captain said.

“Aye Sir.” John replied.

He brought the vessel to the position the captain ordered, but before the captain could give the command to fire the rail guns, the image of the largest man made object ever constructed shimmered into view.

“OH MY GOD!” the captain said slowly. All over the bridge, mouths dropped open in disbelief.

“Olympus. ” I whispered loudly. I was the only person on the Excalibur who had seen the enormous vessel before. It had attacked the Sovereign of the Sky years ago.

“Olympus? ” Commander West said.

“Are you sure, Commander?” he said to me.

“Yes Sir. You don’t forget something that big.” I replied. The massive vessel reminded me of a crab. Its hanger deck could hold dozens of ships the size of Excalibur in it and then still have room for several Sovereign of the Sky class space liners.

The pirate vessel that we were pursuing was just entering the enormous hanger bay. Five other warships, frigates judging by their size, exited the ship and set course towards us. Suddenly the pursuer became the pursued.

“Spin up all missile batteries and rail guns! Bring all plasmas batteries online!” the captain ordered. “Mr. Hursky, bring us around one hundred and eighty degrees! Full speed ahead!”

In light of the overwhelming firepower against us, I think the

captain was correct in ordering our retreat. I only wished we could have done so quicker.

Olympus seemed to utilize a scattering field, a field that surrounds the vessel and “scatters” light around it so to render the ship invisible to most sensors, both visibly and otherwise. I say that because the massive vessel simply vanished as we approached the one hundred thousand kilometers distance mark, the same distance as when it first appeared. The five other ships also disappeared, but reappeared a few seconds later as they cleared the scattering field’s effect.

We may have had superior firepower over the smaller ships, however we were also much larger than the frigates and there was five of them to our single ship. It would not be hard for them to destroy us if we were caught in crossfire.

The captain ordered John to find a large asteroid that we could use to hide the ship till reinforcements arrived. However that was easier said than done. Most of the asteroids in this particular region of the Belt were small, about the size of a house or a small building. In fact, it took John roughly twenty minutes to find one suitable for our purpose.

Meanwhile, the pursuing ships were gaining on us. The blasts from their forward plaser cannons crept closer to our hull, with a few making contact with our aft hull plating. We managed to disable one of the frigates with a lucky shot from our rear rail guns. The remaining ships however continued to pursue.

“There is a larger asteroid bearing fourteen degrees off our bow! It’s nearly five kilometers in diameter.” the captain said to John. “Take us underneath its south pole, according to our current perspective. I want you to perform a half loop behind the asteroid and remain inverted when we reach the top while we fire and take out the enemy. – You catch that Lieutenant?” he said turning to Henry.

“Aye, sir! Take out the bastards at the top of the loop sir!” Lt.

Flagstone replied.

“Patel! Make sure you keep a good track on our friends out there and extrapolate each ship’s position as we top that loop!” Captain Douglas ordered. “Feed your threatboard data to weapons targeting computers. Ready tubes one through four for snapshot! Hopefully between the threatboard data and the snap shot data we can take out all four of the ships at once.”

Tension filled the bridge as everyone’s eyes (which weren’t monitoring a screen of some type) watched the asteroid grow in size. The enemy ships had closed the gap to within fourteen thousand kilometers.

Swiftly Excalibur knifed its way through the ancient debris field, the remains of a planet that had long ago been destroyed. The nameless asteroid filled the view through the forward viewports and every screen, except those tracking the pirate vessels, was focused on the giant rock.

Within seconds the small planetoid was above us, relatively speaking. Our ship entered the loop just as a fighter aircraft would during a combat exercise. The big difference was that we, the occupants of the ship, had no sensation of flying upside down due to the nature of space. To us, when we topped the loop, it seemed that the pirate ships were flying upside down.

“Execute Snapshot!” Captain Douglas cried as the Excalibur reached the zenith position. Instantly, four torpedoes streaked through the space between us and the pirates. Point defensive systems sprung to life on board the outlaw vessels, missing the cylindrical avatars of death by mere inches.

“Direct hits with all torpedoes!” Henry screamed in his joy as the torpedoes detonated.

Massive explosions and secondary explosions could be seen. The entire crew celebrated with high fives, clapping and cheering.

“Knock it off! That’s enough!” Commander West shouted. Instantly everyone stopped the celebrating and returned to their assigned tasks.

“Damage report!” the XO said to me.

“No significant damage sir! A few bumps and bruises but nothing very serious. Doctor Ransom reports that Spaceman Bryant broke his arm while attempting to repair a conduit that had burst on deck five. He will be fine in a few days.” I said, repeating what I was told. “COB reports all shuttles and spacecrafts are undamaged sir. Other than a few conduits, he says Excalibur is undamaged.”

“Our aft hull plating took a few big hits. Tell COB to have someone check them thoroughly.” The captain said, “I have...”

“Torpedoes bearing oh eight nine!

Range nine thousand kilometers and closing sir!” Patel screamed.

“How many?”

“Two sir!”

“Evasive maneuvers!”

“Evasive maneuvers, aye captain!” John repeated.

“One of those bastards must have gotten them off before they were destroyed!” Henry said as he slapped the side of his console in frustration.

“Range five thousand and closing fast!” Lieutenant Patel said.

“Increase speed to maximum!” Captain Douglas ordered. All heads turned towards him.

“Aye sir, maximum speed.” John said turning back to his control panel.

We were heading straight towards the deadly torpedoes’ path.

“Five seconds till impact! Four, Three, Two...” Patel counted down from his station. As the lieutenant said zero, nothing happened.

“The torpedoes did not have time to arm themselves!” the

commander stated, and everyone rejoiced for the second time that day. Olympus seemed to have again disappeared into the nothingness that was space.

We returned to check on the mining colony on PR45A. Upon our arrival, we discovered an empty base, at least empty of life. In all we counted three hundred seventy six bodies. Most of them died when a hatch was breached by the pirates during the raid. We were studying the footage we had

gathered from the mining base. The security holo cameras had recorded that the pirates had removed one particular item from a vault. It was a large crate, large enough to hold two men.

But the camera's also revealed something else.

"Tighten up on that frame of holo footage, please." I said to Lieutenant Harrison as I noticed something familiar. She focused in on the spot where I had indicated. There before us was an old enemy my cousin, Mistress Blackwater in all her 3D glory was obviously in charge of this raid.

Excalibur returned to the site of the battle and remained at station keeping near the debris field, the remains of the four pirate vessels. We provided security while The Tucson and its sister ship The Santa Fe, sifted through the remains of the recently destroyed warships looking for anything that would help us in our fight against the pirates and our current "cold war" with the Titan Republic.

THIRTY FIVE

For the next several months we continued on our assigned patrol, with only the apprehension of two separate small time smugglers too break the monotony. The first smuggler was only transporting controlled substances but the second smuggler however was of great interest to me. His name was Jeremiah Jericho, and he dealt in slaves, particularly pleasure girls.

“Doggoneit, John! I know he knows something!” I shouted at John during our evening meal in the mess hall. “His ship was coming from Autonoe heading for Ceres, where we know there is a lucrative market!”

Ceres is the largest planetoid in the Belt, and is actually considered a dwarf planet. Primarily it is a mining planetoid. However, like always found around the exomining industry, a black market, along with its whore houses and gambling had sprung into existence there.

“Calm down,” John told me. “The captain will never allow you to question the prisoner, especially in the emotional state you are in now.”

“But you don’t understand, he could probably tell us something about that mysterious woman at my father’s funeral!” I said pleading my case.

“Let the captain and Major Savage do their jobs,” he replied.

“I know,” I said as the group of eleven girls ranging in ages from fourteen to twenty entered the mess hall. “Maybe the girls might be able to tell us something.” I whispered to him.

It seemed strange to watch them as they stood in line waiting to

receive their meals. The youngest four seemed very happy to be on board the Excalibur, safe from harm. They were playful and truly seemed to be enjoying deck five's recreational facilities, where they played games and watched holovids with the rest of our crew.

The girls in the middle though- I could not read them. The three of them seemed to be typical teenagers except for one, who displayed no emotions, what so ever. The oldest of the girls however seemed almost angry about being rescued. It was as if we had no right to keep them from their jobs.

Mostly these women stayed in their quarters.

The entire crew was told not to become too friendly with any of the young ladies. We were also specifically banned from talking about their captivity with them.

"I don't think that is a very good idea." John said.

"I know that this Jericho guy know something that could help!" I said to him.

"May we sit here with you?" a girl's voice asked.

I looked up to see three of the girls from the pirate ship standing behind me. The one who had spoken wore a lovely dark blue dress that ended just above her knees. In her hands, the fourteenish looking girl carried a tray of food.

"Of course," I said as John and I made room for the teenagers.

"This is a wonderful ship!" the blond girl said in a perky voice. "It is the biggest I have ever been on!"

"That's because you haven't been on too many!" the dark skinned girl of African decent shot back.

The third girl had red hair. It seemed that she was the shy one of the group. She sat down between her two companions, never once looking up at us, preferring to keep her gaze down on her tray.

"I am Angela!" the blond said. Her outgoing personality

reminded me of Sonja, my missing friend from ten years ago.

“I am Carol!” the dark skinned girl said following her friend’s lead. “Her name is Iona. She doesn’t really talk though. I think that a client did something to her and ever since she has not said a word.”

“Yeah, Carol and I try to look out for her when we can.” Angela continued. “Poor kid’s been put through the ringer more so than the rest of us!”

Iona sat between her friends eating her imitation fried shrimp with salad. I was quite sure that she had been listened to our conversation including her friend’s explanation about her strange behavior, but she did not react to it. I just could not understand what could happen to a person that would screw them up so much that they would stop talking. She watched people around us as if she was scared of something, maybe expecting something to happen. I watched as her gaze fell on Major Savage who was leaving the mess. It was as if she was afraid of him specifically.

The mess hall was beginning to get pretty crowded with my fellow off duty shipmates. During our meal, Angela had asked John and I to give them a tour of the ship. We agreed and stood up to leave. One of the older girls that had also been held captive passed us as we made our way through the doors and into the corridor. In the few seconds that I saw her face, I could tell that she had been crying. I also had noticed that the tattoo on her neck was the same design as that of the woman I met at the funeral. She had long dark hair and wore a long flowing gown. Her eyes however had the look of someone who was very frightened, but was trying not to show it. Why would she still be afraid now that she had been rescued?

John, the girls and I exited the mess hall and turned a corner on our way to the visitors’ gallery on the command deck so the girls could see the bridge. After a few more meters, I stopped, feeling that something wasn’t right.

“Hold up John,” I said. “I need to go back to the Mess; I think I left something there. You and the girls go on; I’ll meet you on the bridge.” I turned to make my way back to the Mess Hall. As I approached the corner leading to the mess hall, a loud explosion rocked the ship.

Instantly emergency alarms sounded and smoke filled the corridor. People ran in all directions as everyone tried to ascertain what had just happened. Emergency bulkheads automatically closed behind us, effectively shutting off this part of the ship. Through the

billowing dark smoke, I could see the doors of the Mess Hall had been blown off their hinges.

I moved closer to the room, all the while covering my face to filter out the deadly toxic fumes from the fire and smoke. I stumbled and fell, hitting my head on the deck. I looked towards my feet to see what had tripped me up and instantly was appalled to find someone’s severed leg.

Our ship has a crew complement of approximately one thousand eight hundred Space Force sailors and marines. In the blink of an eye we lost two hundred and sixty two of them. The playback of the security video had shown that the young girl that I had taken notice of had entered the room and made her way to the middle of the crowded floor and sat down. Not in a chair but literally on the floor.

Just as people began to notice her, she raised both hands to the sides of her head and squeezed her ear lobes. An instant later she exploded. Of all the people in that room, only a little more than a hundred and twenty people survived. Eighty or so were injured or lost body parts.

Master Chief Petty Officer Jason Taylor was among those most severely hurt, with a piece of conduit piercing through his torso. His artificial heart had been damaged at he was at risk of bleeding out. I made my way through the carnage to stoop beside the aged black man

who had been a friend to my father and my lifelong mentor. This would be his last tour of duty as he was set to retire next year.

As I knelt beside him, I discovered that pinned underneath him, Spaceman First Class Ryan, a young crewmember who had just enlisted six months ago, was held by the same piping that was also protruding from COB's chest. She too was, like the master chief, still alive.

"Medic! Medic!" I shouted above the noise of the aftermath. Small spot fires dotted the room as people began sifting through the debris. Parts of decks four and six were exposed, due to the force of the explosion. I thanked God that there was not a hull breach. COB began to regain consciousness just as Doc Ransom made his way to our position. He was in shock, feeling no pain.

"Raymond?" he asked. "What has happened?"

"There has been an accident and you are badly hurt. Don't try to talk." I said to him.

"I feel so weird," the older man said to me.

"Shhhh! don't try and talk, Chief. That's an order," I said as I held his hand.

"(Cough... cough) Don't try and pull rank on me young man. Don't forget I used to know you when you were still in diapers! I even knew you before you wore diapers!" he said to me laughing till blood started to mix with his phlegm as he coughed.

His words were true. Their friendship could be traced all the way back to my father's academy days. Uncle Jason had been my father's mentor and also a good friend to my family. It pained me to see him lying there with that pipe sticking out of his chest.

"It doesn't look good," The doctor said after examining both him and the still unconscious woman trapped beneath.

"Spaceman Ryan may bleed out and die if we don't get her into surgery soon. The conduit is piercing her lower abdomen and that same conduit is also going through Master Chief.

“Unfortunately in his case, it has lacerated his artificial heart. If we remove him, he will die within minutes, as soon as the pressure is released, before we can repair the damage.”

“Can’t we just cut the conduit?” I asked, not wanting to believe that the chief might die.

“That metal is part of OGN relay net that runs the entire length of the ship. It is almost as strong as the alloys that make up the hull of this ship. It will take at least a half an hour to cut through. Spaceman Ryan will be dead in ten minutes.”

“Doc report,” the captain ordered as he made his way to us. The doctor quickly briefed Captain Douglas on the situation. While he was doing so, I kept Chief Taylor company.

“Listen Ray, don’t give up hope. I believe your dad is still alive,” he whispered.

“Shh. Don’t talk, Save your strength,” I said gripping his hand.

“No! Listen, Ray. I have served in the Space Force for forty three years. And in all that time I have seen the best sights that our solar system has to offer. I have been fortunate enough to have stood on dozens of alien worlds and have known the finest people in the service, with Tony Rodriguez being one of the best,” the old man said. “I know that the only thing keeping me alive right now is this hunk of metal that is sticking out of me here. But that little girl behind me has just started her life. If you don’t get this pole out of her,” he gasped as he began to feel some pain, “she is gonna be dead!” He started to pull himself forward off of the hollow metallic shaft.

“No!” I cried.

Doctor Ransom turned from the captain and immediately realized what was happening. “You old fool! If you move you will die!” he yelled as he knelt down with me. I quickly made room for him so that I would not be in his way.

“Captain! I know what I must do sir!” COB pleaded with

Captain Douglas. "This is my time Roger. You know it is sir."

The captain, who had knelt down to grasp his other hand, just looked at his friend. "I understand." Captain Roger Douglas stood slowly. He raised his right hand to give him a perfect salute which Master Chief Petty Officer Jason Taylor returned promptly. "God's Speed, sailor. God's speed." The captain whispered.

The chief then turned to me and said "Tell Tony that I loved him and your entire family. He was like a brother to me. You will become an officer just like your father Ray. I know it. Keep your faith."

He pulled himself forward as blood began to ooze from his chest. A few seconds later, it was also spewing from his mouth. But he continued to pull himself forward till he could not do so any more. The doctor and I grabbed an arm and pulled him the rest of the way off of the bloody metal piping. We laid him down gently on a nearby table. The doctor and a medic grabbed the girl, who had also lost a lot of blood, unimpaled her and placed her on a waiting gurney. I stayed with COB over the next few minutes while he slipped quietly into death.

I am not a stranger to death as I have seen many people die in my twenty six years of existence. But this felt different. Almost as if one of my parents had died. I guess you can't know the feelings I was going through until you have gone through something like it yourself.

"Lieutenant!" I heard someone say.

"Rodriguez! Lend a hand over here!" Major Savage called to me. I stood up and made my way over to help him move debris in search for other survivors. Someone placed a sheet over COB's face.

The captain and the rest of the senior staff came onto the bridge wearing grim faces. Rumors about the bombing flew all over the ship, with some people believing that the pirates were the ones responsible for the unprovoked attack. Others believed that the Titan Republic was somehow responsible. One thing for sure though, no one had any

concrete answers including Jeremiah Jericho.

Within an hour of the bombing, all of the remaining young ladies that had been rescued were being detained in the brig; Carol, Angela, and Iona included. None of the women had any idea that the bomber was going to do what she did. At least I believe that the three teenagers John and I ate with were innocent.

Captain Jericho on the other hand had no comment, he was found dead in his cell, a suicide victim.

As the weeks went by Major Savage became frustrated with the whole situation. One could hear it in his voice as he barked orders to his men. Captain Douglas also felt frustrated. Both men were angry and seemed to take the bombing personally.

The captain took his seat on the bridge with the first officer following his lead. The other officers also went to their assigned stations on the bridge. Lieutenant Harrison relieved me of duty and took over the communications board.

Just as she sat down, a light flashed on the the screen indicating an incoming communication from Space Force Command.

“Captain,” she said turning to Captain Douglas, “There is an incoming message from Space Force Command for you marked “Level Ultra”. “Level Ultra” refers to the classification of the message. In this case, it meant that the message was for his eyes only and was highly classified, the highest level possible.

“I’ll take it in my office Katy,” the captain told her as he got up from his chair and walked over to the door to his private office just off the bridge. When he returned twenty minutes later, his face had a look of renewed determination. “Put me on shipwide Katy.”

The lieutenant nodded at him a moment later, indicating that his mic was now opened and set to broadcast shipwide on the 1MC (the ship’s public address system).

“Attention, All hands, now hear this; I have just been in contact

with Space Force Command Headquarters. As of oh six thirty this morning, SFS Time, The United Solar Alliance is at war with the Titan Republic of Saturn.

The bombing that took place in our own deck five mess hall a month ago was part of an orchestrated attack which included twelve other front line vessels. The heavy attack cruisers U.S.A.S. Yangtze and The Euphrates were completely destroyed with the loss of all hands. Space Force HQ on Luna itself has been attacked as well as several other military and civilian installations in the Alliance. The U.S.A. House of Parliament was also attacked and destroyed.

“The Vice Chancellor and several Ministers are dead. Marshal law has been declared in many of the major cities on Earth, Mars and the Alliance held worlds of the Jupiter System. All Titan ambassadors have been expelled and given forty eight hours to leave Alliance territories.

“It has been confirmed that many of the pirates that we have been pursuing are in truth privateers, agents for the Titan Republic of Saturn. Their goal is to drive the Alliance all the way back to Earth. Well that is not gonna happen! Our immediate orders are to proceed to the Space Force Garrison at 324 Bamberg to surrender our prisoners.”

There was no noise save for the stunned silence and the monotonous hum of the electronic machines on the bridge of the Excalibur. Every officer and crew member looked at one another, not sure of what to do or say. Captain Douglas then changed his tone as he continued.

“I know that everyone has loved ones throughout the Alliance. I know that you may be worried about them. But rest assured, we will die to protect them if we must. They will be safe. You and I serve aboard a great ship; ne whose name has a rich history. Excalibur. Apart from it being the name of the legendary sword of the fabled King Arthur of old,

it also means “battle hard”. It’s a ship made for war. It’s a good ship, with a great crew. Together, we will “battle hard” to avenge the countless deaths that were suffered over the past twelve hours. We will defend our freedoms against those who would take them away! The Titan Republic will regret the day they decided to attack The Alliance! They will regret taking on the Space Force!”

We all cheered louder than if we were at a sporting event or a musical concert. The next few days were spent preparing ourselves for allout war. Space Force, up until now had never really fought a war in space. The closest thing to it had been small police actions or battles with pirates and their small fleets; usually numbering no more than five or six vessels. My uncle unfortunately was one of the main pirate leaders.

“Commander, I have an incoming transmission from 324 Bamberg sir,” I said as I looked up from my communications screen.

“Put it through to my console Lieutenant Commander ,” Commander West ordered.

“Captain!” the voice on the other end of the video display said after I rerouted the signal.

“No Sir, I am Commander George West, the XO. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?” he replied.

“Commodore William P. Humphreys, the Commandant of this facility,” the stranger replied. “I understand that you have some prisoners for me?”

“Yes I do, sir,” the commander said. “In all there are twenty nine of them.”

“Good commander. I see that you are due to dock here within the next two hours.”

The commodore shifted gears a little bit before continuing. “I also hear that you have a young lieutenant named Raymond Rodriguez among your crew?”

My eyes immediately looked at the commander as his gaze fell upon me. Why in the world would this major be interested in me? I wondered. I could tell from the commander's expression that he had the same thought.

"That is correct. He is now a Lieutenant Commander. He was the communications officer to whom you just spoke with before me."

"Ah, I see," he said. "May I request that he joins you on your away team when you transfer the prisoners to us?"

"May I ask why?"

"I have a prisoner here that I would like for him to meet."

THIRTY SIX

The garrison at 324 Bamberga (also known as Fort Bam) looked about as inviting as an old style prison from the twentieth century. Created by hollowing out an asteroid, the facility served as a prison and a military outpost for Space Force vessels in the belt.

We docked at docking port Eleven B.

All twenty nine prisoners were marched through the port where they were greeted by armed guards from the garrison. I saw the three girls, hands in magnetic shackles, as they passed me in the corridor leading to the port. All three looked scared, especially Iona, who had made eye contact with me. In that fraction of a second, I knew that she and her friends Carol and Angela were all innocent, victims of a corrupt society that had failed them. I also knew that she had knowledge that could help us to discover the truth about the bomb plot.

I walked with Commander West to the port and entered the SFC Garrison. We were greeted by Commodore Humphreys and shown to a stark room that contained a few chairs and nothing else. One chair had been set facing the others. The Commodore offered me the middle seat with the XO on my right and he sat on my left. The two guards stood behind us near the door that we had just come through.

On the opposite side of the room, another door stood, closed.

“Bring the prisoner in.” The Commodore said into his com unit. To the Commander and I he said, “The Intrepid dropped this one off about a week ago. She said that her name was Captain Jenifer Walters, a small time trading ship captain. The skipper of the Intrepid was suspicious of her story and decided to board her. That’s when things

really became interesting.

“She fired on the first shuttle sent over to her vessel,” he continued, “and then managed to elude the next combat shuttle Intrepid sent. Captain Washbrook said she had to disable her ship with plaser cannon before they were able to board.”

“What did they find, sir?” West asked.

“Nothing, that’s just it, nothing was found,” the commodore said, his hands thrown up to add emphasis. “Captain Washbrook could not find anything illegal on board the ship nor any indications that it had been used in any smuggling operations. The only thing was the Ident tag; it had been altered. Because of that, the ship was impounded and brought here along with our prisoner so that my guys could go over it with a fine toothed comb.

“We here at Fort Bam are very proud of our people and the ability to discover the facts about a case. Case in point lieutenant,” the somewhat stout older gentleman said to me.

“Yes sir?”

“You are Tony Rodríguez’s kid, the one who was involved with the Sovereign of the Sky affair a few years back?”

“Yes sir,” I repeated.

“Yeah, I think you will know our mysterious Captain Walters.”

Just then the other door opened and five guards entered the room with a young woman in mag cuffs, similar to the ones that the prisoners we were dropping off were wearing. The guards looked as if they were having a difficult time managing the prisoner; judging from the bruises I saw them with. Her hair was obscuring her face as if she had been fighting, which she was. They roughly sat her down in the chair and the cuffs were demagnetized and quickly remagnetized to the chair, which I noticed was bolted to the floor.

Though her hair still obscured her face, her neck was not. That same tattoo design was there on her neck, small and just under her left

ear. She swung her head to clear her hair from her face. My eyes grew wide and my mouth fell opened when I realized who was sitting in front of me.

“SONJA!” I said standing up.

“RAY...mond. Uh hey there, how’s it going?” she said with a slight grin, obviously surprised to see me.

Sonja Kincaid was my not quite girlfriend who had disappeared ten years ago. Rene Robinson, Mike’s father, had commandeered a shuttle at gun point aboard the USAS Invincible during a battle with the notorious pirate Uncle Gregory Jones.

My father and Sonja had become his captive that day.

“I have so many questions.” I said as I sat back down. Sonja looked so uncomfortable with the restraints. It hurt me to see her in cuffs.

“Is it necessary to have her restrained like this Commodore, sir?” I asked Commodore Humphreys.

“Son, you see those guards over there?”

“Yes sir.”

“Gave each of those men every bruise you see and some you can’t see, she did! She single handedly put several of my men in the infirmary! She stays restrained!”

I looked at Sonja and apologized with my eyes.

“When we ran her scan through the SFC database, we knew who she really was immediately, even though she kept insisting that she was this Captain Jenifer Walters. That is why when I heard Excalibur was in route to us, I asked about you.” the commodore explained to me. “Now maybe you can get her to talk.”

“Yes sir,” I replied. “Can I speak with her alone?”

The commodore looked at me and began to tell me ‘no’. But then I guess he had a change of heart.

“Two guards will stay in the room, clear?” he said to me. Then

he looked at Sonja. "Do you promise to behave yourself... 'Captain'?"

She looked at me and then back at the commodore.

"Yes Commodore, I promise. And I am also sorry about your men. Except for that one spaceman that put his hands where he shouldn't." she said.

"Lieutenant Commander, I give you ten minutes. We will be right outside. Besides,... I really got to pee" he said as he stood up. The commander also stood; looked at the two of us, and followed the commander out of the door. Only the two guards at the door remained.

"It was you, wasn't it?" I accused.

"Huh?" she said.

"It was you that shoved that note into my hands at my father's funeral on Europa." I recognized her body, the way she walked and carried herself. That, along with the tattoo on her neck, told me that she was my mysterious woman.

"Yeah, It was me," she said. "I had been sent by your dad to tell you that he was still alive."

"Then who was it that we buried that day on Europa?"

"Your dad." she said.

I looked at her.

"A synthetic," I said.

"Don't look at me like that! It was a last minute decision that Commander Rodriguez made." she said defensively.

Synthetics has been illegal in Alliance space for at least one hundred years. They were clones, clones that were the exact duplicates of their originals, grown in a little over one month's time. Their one drawback, they usually died within a year of manufacture.

It was decided by the powers that be that it was cruel to manufacture the synthetics only to watch them die. So the production and manufacturing of these artificial "people" was declared to be illegal. The cloning of specific body part was okay if their was a legitimate

medical reason for it, say someone needed a new heart or lung. Because the artificial body part would combine with living tissue from the prime, that organ would live as long as the host did.

“Don't tell me that my dad commissioned ...” I started to say.

“It had been done against his will.” Sonja said. “The clone begged me on his last day of life to burn his body after he was dead. He asked me to place him in an old escape pod from some ship wreck and let it drift into a well traveled shipping lane. He wanted to provide some closure for you and your family. He told me that he wasn't sure that your father's original, would ever escape from Gregory's grasp.” she said as her eyes became distant with the memory.

“I had tried to smuggle him out. Thought that I had succeeded too! But it turned out to be the synthetic that I freed instead.” she said as she looked down at the floor.

“I am sorry I failed, Raymond,” she said as tears ran down her face, her eyes meeting mine.

“Don't be Sonja.” I said wiping away her tears. “You tried.”

Then a thought occurred to me, “Why didn't you just come forward with the information once you were in Alliance space? Why all the mystery?”

“Raymond, I...” she was shaking, her face turned away from me again, as if she couldn't bear to look me in the eye. “...I was, still so ashamed of what I have done over the past decade. If you only knew what they made me do.”

“I understand Sonja, but you were not responsible for it.” I said as gently as I could.

“I know that! But I am still so ashamed! I was a pleasure girl Raymond! Do you know what a pleasure girl is? I was a sexual plaything for rich old men! And since your uncle thought of me as being unusually attractive, he made me become one of his “special” girls, one who specialized in extracting certain secrets from certain men that came to

one of his pleasure parlors.” Her speech became venomous as she described what she had been forced to do.

All the while, she was told that her mother would be killed if she did not do as she was told. She was used as a spy to obtain classified information from key Alliance leaders who would visit Autonoe.

“Time’s up!” the Commodore said as he entered the room. “We have just learned that a pirate armada is headed our way! It will be here within the hour.”

The Commodore gathered some papers he had left on a table in the room and then turned to me and said, “You had better report to your ship sailor, Excalibur will be releasing it’s moorings in ten minutes.”

“Aye, sir,” I replied, saluting as I did so. He was then hastily led out of the room by his aides.

As a siren began to wail, the guards hastily unshackled Sonja from the chair and began to move her back to her cell. They told me to stay where I was. Before they could unshackle her hands completely, she managed to knock out both guards with lightning fast martial arts moves that looked to be a mixture of Jujitsu and Karate or Kung fu.

“Where did you learn that?” I asked as she grabbed my hand.

“You can learn a lot when you’ve been where I’ve been!” she yelled as she opened the door to the corridor. “Come on, I think the station is under attack!” she said. Then suddenly she stopped and turned to me. “I need to know one thing Ray, can I trust you?”

“Of course you can trust me.” I told her.

Men and women were running everywhere and no one noticed the two of us as we made our way toward the docking levels. Somewhere around the third corner we turned, I asked her,

“Sonja, what are you doing?”

“What? You don’t know an escape when you see it?”

“An escape!” I said as I stopped running and held her hand

tightly, stopping her in her tracks. "Sonja, why? Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know! Anywhere I guess!" she said pulling at my hand, trying to make me release her.

"Look I don't know why you are so scarred, but believe me, I won't let anything happen to you!" I shouted at her.

"I can take care of myself!" she said as she kissed me and then kicked me in my head. I released her immediately, mostly because I was shocked that she would attack me. I had managed to block the full force of the kick, but still I felt a good deal of it's impact. I picked myself off of the deck while she ran down the corridor towards the docking levels.

"Sonja!" I shouted towards her fleeing form. "It doesn't have to be like this!"

I ran towards my ship on level eleven, ten levels up from where I was at that moment.

As I made my way up, I passed a number of personnel, preparing the base for an attack. In nine minutes I walked through the airlock, just as it was about to be secured. I ran directly towards the bridge.

When I arrived, the captain was addressing the crew...

"...Currently we are tracking a small armada of Raider vessels approaching Three Juno Station. They should reach it within the next twentyfive minutes. We are counting a total of nine capital warships, and a number of smaller ships.

"It is our belief that they intend to gain a foothold there. The station has a decent defensive grid in place, however against a force that size they could not hold out for very long. It is up to us and the other Alliance ships presently nearby to protect Juno. We are down by roughly ninety drone pilots and sixteen fighter pilots, thanks to the recent bombing.

"People, this may become an early major battle in our war

against the Titan Republic and I expect us to give everything we can to win this battle. That is all.”

I approached my station in the CIC and found my console was being occupied by another officer, Lieutenant Lewis who looked up as I approached.

“You have been temporarily reassigned, sir.” she said. “Check in with the XO on the auxiliary bridge, sir.” Her message for me was short and to the point. Just like her personality. The lieutenant had very few friends and never participated in any activities. I almost felt sorry for her.

“Lieutenant Commander Rodriguez reporting for duty sir!” I said when the XO looked up.

“Lieutenant! Nice of you to join our little party!” Commander West was not in a good mood.

“Am I to understand that you rated at a level nine in combat space craft? You can fly anything from a SF236/8 Dragon Space Fighter to a DF950 Wasp Drone Fighter and everything in between, correct?”

“Yes sir.” It was true. Like my father, I have a natural talent for flying combat spacecraft.

“Then why in god's green earth are you wasting time behind a desk on the bridge?” he asked.

“I'm a line officer, sir. My place is here on the bridge,” I replied.

“Well right now I need a drone jockey,” he said to me as he consulted his pad. “Report to Commander Montgomery for assignment.” And with that I was dismissed.

THIRTY SEVEN

The flight decks of the Excalibur were huge, in truth, they were the largest opened spaces on the massive vessel. They held approximately one hundred and twenty five Wasps, one hundred and twenty SF235/3s and sixty-two SF236/8 Dragons. Add to that a few dozen personnel transports and various other crafts, all for a total of more than two hundred smaller ships that called the Excalibur home.

I found Commander James Montgomery on Flight Deck Two. The commander was a middle aged man in his early fifties who used to be quite a rocket jockey. I had heard through the grapevine that he had to give it up due to an advanced case of osteoarthritis. It had not forced him to retire early, but it kept him out of the pilot's seat of both drones or a fighters. At least this is the current theory about why he was always grumpy and in a foul mood. He reminded me of the basic operations of his flight decks, how Flight Decks Two and Four were geared for the

unmanned DF950 Wasp Drone Fighters, while the other two, Flight Decks One and Three, were for the SF235/3 and the newer SF236/8 Dragon space fighters. He assigned me to pilot a drone.

There are certain advantages to piloting a drone over a conventional fighter. For one, the pilot never leave the ship. Instead he floated in a simulator, which gave him a computer generated view of everything around him. There was no need to wear a flightsuit like the traditional fighter jocks, allowing his reaction time to be much quicker than that of the Dragon pilots. The Wasp's could also out perform the Dragons because there was no gee forces to contend with.

That meant that he could take tighter turns and other maneuvers which may make the Dragon pilots pass out. If you have never been inside of a Wasp's control ball, you are never going to appreciate the true difference between it and a Dragon's cockpit.

After being outfitted with a sensor suit that tracks your every movement, you approach the outside of the simulator. It consists of five steps that lead to a large ball, which sorta resemble a giant eyeball, which is suspended in a frame of electronic gears and components. The center of the "eyeball" is actually a hatch into which you are inserted.

By placing the helmet (which is more of a full face mask than a helmet) on your head, you immediately become the drone you are flying. You float on your belly, however there is no gravity inside the sphere.

Well not entirely... You see, when your drone is in a gravity field such as what is generated by the gravplates on board Excalibur's flight deck, you can feel it. But once you are launched, there is no sensation gravity on the pilot inside the sphere. The artificial gravity is nullified. The suit that you are wearing allows you to control your physical spatial orientation with your mind. This in turn controls the drone's physical spatial orientation. Your eyes are tracked via the suit to control the plaser's targeting on your drone. Your speed is control by your mind as well. Simply think of yourself flying at a certain speed and your drone obeys.

Of course there are some drawbacks. One is the range in which you can operate. It is limited to a few thousand kilometers distance from the ship. Beyond that and the time delay between you and the drone becomes too great. You also have only one microfusion reactor to power everything, including the weapons and fuel. The Dragon fighters have three. But perhaps the most important drawback is the feedback. The interconnection between the pilot and his drone is so intertwined that any shot that strikes the spacecraft could potentially kill the pilot

via electrobiofeedback.

The chamber, one of ten, was a large self contained room that housed twelve drone pods. One pod was for the leader, the other eleven were for the drone jocks. We stood in front of our assigned pods, attended by a small flock of technicians making sure that we were each connected to the computer system.

For each pilot there were five attendants, each with their own check lists. One deck above us was the massive flight deck from which the actual drones would launch. The drone sorta looked like fighters except smaller. From the tip of the nose to the end of it's aft engines, it measured no more than four meters in length. It's single microfusion reactor, though small, could still propel the little craft to high velocities nearly matching its Dragon fighter counterpart.

As I was entering the sphere, I felt the vibrations from several explosions in the distance. It seems that the pirate armada had arrived.

From what I was told during my all too brief briefing, the armada consisted of nine large ships, two of which were nearly as large as the Excalibur. Those two ships bore the markings of the Titan Republic Navy. The rest of the ships were either destroyers or cruisers.

For our side, there was the Excalibur, the Justice and the Ben Franklin, all of which were capital ships. Excalibur, being a heavy battle cruiser/carrier, was by far the largest. The other two were battle cruisers. We also had two destroyers, the Obama and the Young, which were permanently based at Fort Bam.

The Intrepid, which had left before we arrived, was in route back to the fort, but she was not expected to arrive until sometime the day after tomorrow. Everyone knew that the battle would long be over by then. Captain Douglas, the senior most ship commander in command of the most powerful ship in the theater, had taken point.

From my HUD I was able to see that he had dispatched the

weaker ships, the Obama and the Young to take up positions roughly a four thousand clicks to the rear port and starboard of us. The other two ships, the Justice and the Ben Franklin, were closer in. The drones and fighters were waiting for the command to launch.

I must admit that I wasn't comfortable not knowing what was happening on the bridge.

I found myself wondering what orders were being issued and to whom? What strategies were floating through the minds of my commanding officers?

As it turned out, I had only a few seconds to ponder those thoughts because across my HUD came the word- "LAUNCH!"

The next moment I found myself outside of the ship accelerating away from it at what would be called supersonic speed if we were on Earth. It is hard to describe the sensation that one feels when launching in a drone. You see nothing but the blackness of space all around you as you accelerate towards your target. Your HUD floats directly in front of you, spitting out its streams of data.

It feels different, different even from when I became stranded during the rescue of the children several months back. Of course this time I had next to no clothes on except the skin tight sensor suit which interpreted my movements and operational thoughts.

Visually, I saw a 360 degree holographic display of the space around me. I could see the Excalibur herself immediately behind me. Besides my squad, I saw all the other big ships engaging the enemy. If I concentrated, I could magnify my vision ahead to see the oncoming enemy fleet heading our way.

Commander Kuro led the attack wing of drones to which I was assigned. I briefly had met the man of Japanese decent when Commander Montgomery introduced us some

twenty minutes ago. He seemed to be a decent enough fellow

slender of build, just a little bit older than me, hansom by anyone's standards, a real swashbuckler type.

“Form up on me!” the lieutenant ordered. “Our job is to distract the enemy and split their attention between us, the other ships. Indications are that they have no fighter or drone support, so we should be able to attack their ships straight on. We have been assigned to take out the Kobo.”

The Kobo was a forty eight gun light cruiser, a relic from thirty years ago. Though old when compared to most of the vessels in the battle theater, it was still a lethal adversary.

Armed with forty fixed plaser cannons, eight multitargeting, high yield plaser cannons, eight forward and rear facing rail guns, and nine torpedo tubes, the Kobo was capable of destroying the fort all by itself.

Our drone wing struck the old ship with everything we could, barley making a dent in it's defense. Her point defense guns tried to kill us as we danced around the Kobo like a hive of bees attacking a bear that had been trying to steal honey. Eventually we were able to take out some of the ship's fighting capacity. I helped destroy five guns myself. Together we had successfully destroyed nearly half of the Kobo's destructive power.

I looked up as a bright light appeared where the Obama had been just an instant before. As the brilliant light subsided, flaming debris replaced the majestic light cruiser/destroyer. Looking across the virtual field of battle, I saw that all of the ships were engaged in heated slug fests.

“Ray!,” I heard through my radio. It was Commander Kuro.

“Commander,” I replied.

“I want you to take SD's 7, 8, and 9 and concentrate your firepower on the reactors! Shut them down!”

“Yes sir!” I replied. I saw that he and the rest of our squad

attempted to draw the directed fire to themselves leaving the four of us to attack the twin reactors of the large enemy warship. The warships of the Titan Republic used fusion reactors like we did, however we favored smaller reactors running in series while they preferred the much larger more dangerous ones.

SD7, piloted by a woman nicknamed 'Rizzy', joined me on my first run at the target.

My two plaser cannons exploded into action, firing at the two domes that were part of the twin fusion reactors that powered the Kobo.

“Did we hit it?” Rizzy asked after we made our pass.

“No.” I replied. “Tony and Jason, (SD-8 and SD-9 respectively) get setup for your pass!”

“Aye, Commander,” Jason responded.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed a multi-targeting high yield plaser cannon firing in their direction.

“Jason!” I cried. But it was too late. He was one of the few pilots that I had known before being hastily assigned to 'S' Squad. He and his wife had just had a newborn son a month ago. I had asked him why he returned to ship duty so soon. He replied “I just want to make this world a little bit safer for him.”

Unfortunately he would never get to see him grow up. As the two changed their vectors, Tony and Jason's drones were hit and destroyed. As I discovered later, Jason's biofeedback matrix overloaded the neuralinterface and it in turn fried his brain like it was in a microwave oven.

Still in shock, Rizzy and I became even more determined to carry out our mission. On our second pass we connected and were rewarded with the satisfying fireworks display that was the destruction of the Tesla. I came around to rejoin my squad.

Then my world went dark. I wasn't dead. In fact I wasn't even hit.

The Excalibur had sustained a major hit and the flight deck where the drone bay was located had been hit hard. I reached out inside my zero gravity environment to touch the wall of the drone sphere. I found the recessed hatch lever and pulled it. A slight hissing told me that the door was opened. I felt for the edges of the hatch and pulled myself through. The gravity was not working. Not a good sign.

The sounds of pilots and technicians moaning and a lonely klaxon in the distance was all I could hear. I tried to contact the bridge with my subdural communicator (subcom). As I touched the back of my left ear to activate the unit, I could tell immediately that something was very wrong. I received no signal at all. It seemed to be dead.

But it could not have lost power, I thought to myself. It is powered by my body which when I last checked was still working. As I moved through the compartment, I felt parts of bulkheads and people in places where I should not have. Slowly my eyes began to make out the outlines of things. A flame burned at the far end of the drone bay. Someone produced a handful of flashlights and soon a systematic search of the chamber was underway for survivors, even as steps were taken to extinguish the fire. Conducting the search without gravity made the going very slow.

I discovered Commander Kuro, or what was left of him, several meters from where my pod was located. He never knew what had hit him. Only his torso and head could be seen from my vantage point, but I knew that the rest of him was still inside his pod, which was cracked open, only the lower half still attached to its pedestal.

I then did what every first year cadet at the academy had been warned not to do in a zero gee environment. I vomited. The contents of my stomach was expelled in the form of large, shapeless bubbles of bile, which floated around the huge chamber, mixing with other bodily fluids also expelled from the bodies of my crewmates, both living and deceased.

Ensign Richardson made her way to the Lieutenant, checking him for a pulse and not finding one. She looked up at me and shook her head, confirming what I already knew.

“What are your orders, sir?” she asked.

I realized then that I was the senior ranking command officer within the destroyed and isolated drone pod chamber. I was the only line officer.

I thought about it for a moment. “Everyone should report here,” I said pointing to a space near the hatch about forty meters away. “Then, we will split up into groups and continue to conduct your search for survivors. I want anyone who has a background in engineering to start on unjamming that door as soon as possible. Also if we have any other comm specialists, we need to try and establish communications with the bridge. See if anyone have a working subcom.

“Any injured should be brought over here,” I again pointed to an area that seemed to be clear of debris. Another explosion, and again we were subjected to yet another violent shaking. Luckily no one else in our drone bay was killed.

The flight deck for the drones were on the deck above us. My fear at this point was that we would start to lose integrity on that deck and we would all be swept outside and onto the open flight deck. I noticed that every liquid like substance, bodily fluids and regurgitated digestive juices, was gently accumulating towards one side of the chamber, up near the ceiling where various conduits and support beams were. I feared the worst. I saw Engineering-mate Henderson working on the hatch, which had jammed due to the framework surrounding the door being bent slightly. I called him over.

“Henderson, have you noticed how everything seems to slowly be gathering up to that one spot?”

“Yes sir.” he replied. “I had noticed.”

“I want you to take a good look at that bulkhead.” I said. “I am

concerned that it will blow.”

“Aye sir!” he said as he grabbed some gear.

A few minutes later he returned.

“I believe that the ceiling will hold lieutenant,” he said. “But we are defiantly loosing air. I will guess that we have something like three to five hours left before we suffocate.”

“How are we coming with communications, Lucy?” I asked, turning to Lucy Hernandez who had been working with the comm panel.

“We should be good sir,” she said. She was floating upside down to make it easier for her to work. “Only problem is that there is no power coming in to the panel.”

“Was it an EMP?” I asked.

“There is no way of telling right now. But... I think we should worry about one thing at a time... sir.” Lucy said as she oriented herself to my position. She hesitated adding that last part, wondering if I would take offense to her breach of military etiquette.

“I know ensign, I know.” I said, choosing to ignore it. I had to remain calm and composed not only for my sake, but for the others as well.

Another few minutes passed by and it was easy to see that the air was getting thinner. The nine injured crewmen were attended to as best as possible with only one, Michelson succumbing to his wounds.

The distant explosions were not as intense nor were they as often. We all cheered when we heard the hissing of air coming from the hatch when it was finally opened. We were finally free!

THIRTY EIGHT

The corridor was as dark as the drone chamber had been, with only emergency lighting and the assorted control panel providing illumination. We checked the other ten pod chambers for the injured and survivors. Each chamber had been destroyed as if a bomb blew in every one of them. We gathered the few survivors and injured and continued on our way.

Checking other decks, there was other damages that seemed “odd.” Parts of the ship that seemed it have sustain the most severe damage was next to areas that had no damage what so ever.

I asked Henderson for his thoughts.

“I was thinking that very same thing, sir,” he said to me. “If you notice, the dispersal of the blasts in those damaged sections, It is almost as if a bomb exploded within the rooms, not from without or as a result of the battle.”

“How would something like that happen? Any ideas?” I asked.

“None, sir” he said, turning to face me, “except for what we are both thinking.”

“A saboteur.” I whispered.

“Aye, sir.”

I noticed a porthole and looked through it. Besides noticing that we seemed to be drifting, I saw the Ben Franklin floating several thousand kilometers in the distance, its hull broken in three places and debris surrounding it. Tiny specks I knew to be life pods were making their way to find a safe docking port. From the lights glowing within its broken hulk, I saw fires that were robbing the precious oxygen

from whoever might have survived.

Beyond that, the enemy ships, many of which were also badly damaged or destroyed were also floating nearby. I had to turn away. The realities of war was more than I wanted to face at this moment. So many people dead; was it worth it? I asked myself.

We made our way up several levels, attempting to reach the bridge or at least to an area that had power. I knew of course that it was entirely possible that the entire ship had been “killed” already, like the Ben Franklin. Occasionally we would find the body of a fallen crew member floating quietly among the debris of twisted bulkheads and buckled ceilings and floors. We moved through it the best we could with our wounded. We also picked up more surviving crew members as we discovered them. A few of the hatches were jammed. When we could, we detoured around to an alternative hatchway. When that was impossible, we disassembled them.

It was slow going at times but eventually we made it to a lounge near the med bay that had power. The lounge was being used as a triage area for Doc Ransom and his team.

At least the gravplating was working, even if the subcoms were not. We dropped off most of our group there, leaving the wounded in the care of the medical personnel. Those that were not hurt helped out.

Sparky had already been there and joined Henderson and I as we continued, despite suffering from a broken arm himself. His gruff voice echoed through room as he refused to stay put.

“This is my ship and I will not standby while she is destroyed!” he said.

I did not argue. He had invested too many years into the Excalibur for me to disagree. Surprisingly, Sparky had already came to the same conclusions as Henderson and I.

“There is no way that that room should have had that type of

damage!” the old engineer said. “I’d stake my engineering license on it! All ten drone pod chambers destroyed? Both port and starboard ? Never!”

“Sparky, I believe you! But who could have done it? And how?” I asked the Lieutenant Commander. We were slowly making our way up from the med bay to the bridge. Five others, all musclebound marine traveled with us, lifting heavy objects and moving rubble, making good use of their powered battle armour.

Henderson looked at me, “You know, the damage seems to be light compared to the destruction we’d witnessed on the lower decks.”

“Yeah,” I said as we made our way to the next deck, “Communications are still out too. So is main computer access. I can understand the computer, but the subcoms? It’s nearly impossible to disable them. “

“This is the kind of damage that I -”

Henderson never finished his sentence. Sparky and I turned our heads as a bolt of plasmer energy shot past us and hit Henderson in the face. His headless body fell backward to the floor before what had just occurred could even register in my mind. We both dove for cover as the marines covered our escape from the line of fire.

“We’ve been boarded!” a marine shouted.

“You think?” I cried. Instinctively, I reached down for my sidearm. I then realized that I was still in my drone jockey uniform, which do not include a sidearm. Thankfully the marine sergeant that was accompanying us had an extra one that he threw to me.

‘Damn! I should have anticipated this!’ I thought as I returned fire. One of the intruders fell, but there were a dozen more still ahead.

“Argg! @#\$\$%!” Sparky cried.

I looked at him and saw that his arm which had been broken and recently set in a makeshift cast by Doctor Ransom was

now completely gone. Thankfully the missing limb, or what was left of it, had been catheterized by the very bolt of plasmatic energy that had damaged it to begin with. Unfortunately it also left Sparky in a tremendous amount of pain.

“I think you should surrender Raymond.” a voice said to me from behind the bulkhead where we had taken shelter.

I turned my head and found another four intruders behind us. Dressed all in black with black battle helmets to match, the enemy had us effectively surrounded. We slowly placed our weapons on the deck and placed our hands on our heads.

The leader of the group lowered his weapon and then removed his helmet. We were shocked to see the face of Major Savage.

THIRTY NINE

“Remember when I mentioned to you about my Special Unit?” the major said. I remembered that day almost six months ago when he had struck up that odd conversation with me.

“You are a Space Force Officer! How could you betray the Alliance like this?” I said as his men disarmed us. We walked down the corridor towards the bridge. Our hands were tied behind our backs with cord. The young man who was tying my hands made eye contact with me and gave me the slightest of nods. The cord, while appearing to be tight, was really loosely tied.

“Various reasons.” the major replied. “The Alliance is an idea whose time has come and gone. Hypocrisy is rampant in our society. People are starving in our great domed cities and space stations.” he paused before continuing, “Do you know where I grew up?”

“No.”

“I grew up in the under city of Armstrong on Luna.” he said. “Back then, there were days where we had nothing to eat but the rats that some of us children used to keep as pets.” His voice seemed far away, as if he were lost in his memories. “Have you ever tasted rat meat or have eaten out of a garbage can?”

“No.” I replied again.

“I have.”

Most of the major cities in the solar system had an *under city* where the poor and the people who refused to conform to societies norms lived. Mostly they were good, hardworking people who were just down on their luck. Others were addicts and such that were forced to

live there because they weren't wanted anywhere else.

The Alliance had programs in place for these people, but unfortunately they kept changing the rules and making unrealistic demands on the people who were trying to participate in their programs. Of course the programs did not help much anyway and most political people would prefer to forget those people even existed instead of dealing with them.

“On Titan, no one ever goes hungry. All of the children are cared for, even those who become orphaned like I was. And they do not have rats!” the Major said with a flash of anger in his expression.

“And that is why you are betraying the Alliance? Because of your crappy childhood?”

I stopped and turned to face him. “Why not just work to make things better right where you were?” I was angry. “Think about all of the orphans that you have made just today! What about poor Henderson back there? I know that he had a kid waiting for him to come home. Of course now he won't be coming home because Major Russell Savage had a bad upbringing! What gives you the right to deprive that child of his father?”

With that the major's anger began to get the best of him. I thought I was done for as I watched him aim his plasmer pistol at my face.

But then there was an explosion, a broadside volley emanating from the twenty two inch plasmer cannons mounted on either side of the Excalibur. It reminded me that the ship was still engaged in battle with the enemy.

Momentarily he lost his balance and I took advantage of it. As the major started to fire, I grabbed his gun arm and pointed it towards one of the pirates that held Sparky. That man went down, followed by another who had been unfortunate enough to be too close to him. Turning, I punched the Major squarely in the face, breaking his nose in the process. He reared back in pain, dropping the plasmer to the deck. He

landed about a meter and a half away.

Regaining his senses, he turned and ran down the hall disappearing through a hatch at the far end.

Sparky, realizing that he was not being held anymore, turned and swung his remaining arm at another pirate. He too fell, tripping over the body of one of the dead men. I shot him as he began to rise from the floor. We took all of the weapons we could from the dead space marines and then Sparky and I raced the remaining distance to the bridge.

As we approached the hatch leading to the bridge, we were met by two guards standing watch. They turned to fire on us.

"Hold it!" I cried. "We are loyal to the Captain and the Alliance!"

The marine sergeant studied the two of us for a few moments, evaluating the truth of my words. We dropped the weapons we were carrying. Deciding that we were alright, he relaxed with his subordinate following his lead.

"Lieutenant Commander, sorry about that." he said to me. "We were ordered not to let anyone pass this hatch except for you and Commander Kuro."

"Commander Kuro is dead. Who is on the bridge?"

"The captain and rest of the bridge officers." he replied.

"Do we have internal communications yet?" I asked.

"Yes sir. It came up five minutes ago." he replied.

I then made direct contact with the captain via my subcom.

"...Can't talk, we are in a fire fight right now!" the captain shouted at me through the communications device.

I grabbed my weapon and activated the latch to open the sound proof hatch.

"Follow me! We've got trouble on the bridge!" I shouted.

Several small explosions rocked the deck as we hurried on to the bridge. My weapon was drawn but at first I was confused as to who was the good guys and who wasn't. At one end of the bridge John was crouched behind a desk, firing his plasmer across the deck to the opposite side of the room. On the opposite side was Lieutenants Patel and Lewis and a few other officers that I did not know.

Performing a barrel roll I made it to the side where my friend was.

"Glad you could join the party, Sir!"

"Sorry I'm late. I was having a party of my own!" I told him.

"Where is the Captain?" I asked. John nodded over to the next station where a body lay on the deck. Spaceman Bartel was shielding him from the fight by covering him with her body. The blood that was pooling underneath the captain on the floor however, told me that he did not have much time left.

With the additional firepower, Lieutenant Patel and Lieutenant Lewis and the handful of other traitors were all dead within a few minutes. I crawled over to where the Captain lay.

"Captain! We are going to get you to the med bay!" I said, even as John gave the order for Doc Ransom to come to the bridge.

"...No time" he whispered. He looked up at me. "The ship?"

"We have been boarded sir. Major Savage was in league with the Raiders. He has, with their help, pulled off a mutiny. We have held our own so far, but right now it is hard to know who is loyal and who is not."

Sparky added, "Sir, the ship is in bad shape. There have been extensive damage throughout and major hull breeches on decks fourteen eighteen and nineteen. The engines are down to a quarter power. I don't think she is gonna make it."

"Raymond! ...You must listen. You are now in command....take this." he said handing me an envelope that had been tucked away in his

now blood soaked uniform jacket's breast pocket. "Open it later...You must take from among the crew those whom you know are loyal....there is a ship... armed merchant vessel ...it was incorporated into the Excalibur's design. Its named the Black Swan. "

"Aye Sir!" Sparky said. "She had been concealed in the ship's design, to be used for special assignment and the like. Not many officers even know it is there!"

"Yes... Sparky, show ...the commander. Don't let Excalibur fall into enemy hands. You must escape... and then blow this ship..." the captain was getting weaker and weaker as the blood poured from his opened wound.

"Sir, I don't know what to say. Commander West..."

"He is dead, sir" Spaceman Bartel said. "Lieutenant Patel killed him just before you arrived. His body is over there" She said pointing behind the captain's station, where his body lay.

"With Commander West, Lieutenant Commanders Kuru and McCord all dead, you are now the captain, sir."

Dr. Ransom arrived just then with an armed escort and began work on the captain.

Just one look at the doctor's face and I knew it was hopeless. I served aboard this vessel for just over a year and now it fell to me to destroy her.

"Keep the crew safe...Commander. Find your father..." and with those words, Captain Douglas died.

FROM THE AUTHOR-

Thank you for purchasing this book. It started of as a small project for my kids who were in their tweens when I began writing in 2012. At that time it consisted of just part one, *The Sovereign of the Sky*. My wife read it and thought that it was good enough to share. So with her encouragement, I began to write the tale that you have before you. With the completion of the second part, *The Fury of Captain Tobias Jones*, I published the story under the title ***The Space Force Chronicles: Book One- Raymond and the Space Pirates***. It was an underwhelming success.

I concentrated on my music for the next few years only jotting down several story ideas for this book and others as they occurred to me. Then one day in 2016, I pulled out the manuscript and decided to continue writing the story. So you dear reader hold in your hands the fruit of all that labor. I truly hope that you have enjoyed reading it. I promise that I will not leave you hanging concerning the several loose plot threads that have been left unanswered so far in this saga. I will keep writing the adventures of Raymond Rodriguez and his family issues. We have not seen the last of Tobias or Gregory Jones. As to when we will see them, that is up in the air for now but I will continue to work on the story as time allows.

I currently have a few other projects that I am working on including a novel about an airship. The title of the novel has not been set in stone just yet, but I am working with the title ***Invictus***. Unlike this book, ***Invictus*** is written with a more mature reader in mind. I want to share with you the first chapter of this story to give you a taste of what it is like and so you can see why I am so excited about it.

A special sneak peek at the new book

INVICTUS

by

Frederick L King

1

“...Because of the Senator, our departure was delayed by two hours this morning. But other than that, we are doing well with our schedule and should reach Saint Louis by six pm” Captain Ed Phillips said into the log recorder on his desk. It had already been a long day and having a V.I.P. on board did not help his disposition. As far as he was concerned, Sen. McKenzie of California was just another blow hard politician. But his superiors in Washington said that he must play nice with the gentleman who held sway over the funding for the new airship program for the Coast Guard. And so the early presidential front runner occupied the VIP cabin on the next deck directly below his. His orders were to transport the senator from Moffett Field in California to New York. This was officially meant to be a PR tour designed to show off the new Coast Guard Airship ***Invictus*** to the world, but unofficially it was a Presidential campaign to help the senator in the polls. Ed hated politics.

The ***Invictus*** was the latest experiment by the military. With a length of over nine times that of a football field, she was 981 meters in

length- or more than twelve times the length of a jumbo jet. She was by far the largest airship ever built in history. This new class of ships was designed for S A R (search and rescue) missions, with advanced surveillance as well as defensive capabilities, its main mission is disaster response, with a complete hospital with a staff of medical personnel to handle all types of emergencies. It also is used for boarder patrol duties and has a complement of various arms, primarily laser cannons as defensive and offensive weapons. Its defenses include a sonic force field which uses solidified sound to stop incoming projectiles. It also has narrow focused EM pulse capabilities (think of the em pulse that an atomic weapon would emit just before a nuclear explosion-which knocks out all electrical activities within a target vessel. The massive solar panels that made up the majority of the skin of the upper hull charged the high capacity Tesla batteries that lined the walls and decks of the massive vessel.

“The Weather Witch wants to have a word, captain.”

Commander Rick Russell, Ed's first officer chimed in via the intercom.

“You know better than that Commander,” Ed said, pressing the respond button on the com device. “If Amy hears you call her that she will kill you!”

“Only if she hears me, sir” Rick replied. “After all, what she don't know won't hurt me!”

Both men chuckled.

“Alright, tell her I'll be up there in a moment.”

“Aye!”

“And Rick,” Ed said, “...Best friend or not, I don't want to hear you talk like that about her again.”

Rick smiled. “Aye, Aye sir.”

Lt. Commander Amy Mitchel was one of the best meteorologist in all of the military. She had a masters from Penn State in Meteorology and then went into a program at OCS , emerging as a full lieutenant less than two years later. She also was an amateur kick boxer with several titles under her belt. He doubted that there was anyone on board the ***Invictus*** that could beat her in a fair fight- man or woman. Luckily for him, her passion was for atmospheric studies. The unique needs of an airship required a person who knew how to read weather conditions intuitively. Ed relied on her judgment for the safety of his ship and crew. She was also his wife.

As he entered the Reuleaux triangled room, he could see to his immediate left the weather center and the banks of computers and instruments that Amy and her people used to make her forecasts. She and an assistant were studying computer screens facing away from him as he entered the bridge, so he was momentarily unnoticed by them.

The center of the room was dominated by his command chair. It featured control panels and monitors on both armrests, designed to allow him to call up any information he may need whenever he needed it. Taking a few steps toward it, he stood silently behind his chair, now

being occupied by Commander Russell who was facing towards the eight large floor to ceiling bridge windows that filled the wide end of the room.

Immediately in front of the Captain's chair a monitor was built into a pedestal. The view screen was almost parallel to the deck, angled up fifteen degrees closer towards the windows. From there, taking a step down on a lower level of the deck was the first officer's chair, with his desk of instruments immediately in front of him. Moving forwards towards the bow of the ship and another step down was a wider desk consisting of two stations- Navigation on the left and Ship Operations on the right.

Then Ed's gaze fell upon the rest of the bridge. Starting from the left after the Weather center was Engineering and Flight Operations with Flight Ops now empty due to the lack of any Osprey or drone flight activity at the moment. On the right side of the room was the Weapons Station followed by Defensive Systems and immediately to his right and behind him was Communications.

“Edward!” Amy said as she made her way over to him.

Rick, upon hearing her voice behind him, sprung from the captain's chair and turned to face her and Captain Phillips. A few other heads turned to look in there direction.

“What you got Lt. Commander?” Ed asked.

“Sir, you remember the memo I sent to you earlier about that rain over the Arizona/New Mexico border this afternoon?”

“Of coarse. You said that there was no need to be concerned about it because it didn't look like it would be a major storm.”

“Well, that is no longer the case. I think we can handle it but, it might get a little bumpy.” she said as she handed him a report on the rapidly changing conditions. “With the senator and his staff on board, I don't know if you want to try and go through it or not.”

“Good thinking.” Ed said. “What about going around it?” he glanced at Rick.

“Those headwinds are already beginning to affect our speed sir.” Rick responded. “I would say that we might loose a good five or six hours by trying to go around it.”

Ed let out his breath. He had noticed that the sky was starting to get darked with more clouds. He knew that five or six hours would be much worse than the nearly two hours behind schedule that they already were.

“Can we climb over it?” he asked.

“That should not be a problem.” Amy said.

“Alright then, let's do it.”

“Aye sir!” Rick said. “Mr James! Take us to 35,000 ft. Stay on present coarse. Comm inform ground of our attitude change.”

“Aye commander!” Lt. Peter James replied at the helm.

“Yes sir!” Lt Bradley said from Communications.

A few minutes later Ed stood up from his chair. “It looks like you guys have everything well in hand. I am going to check in with our

guest and see how he is doing.” he turned and started towards the port side exit that led to the other parts of the ship. “Rick notify me when we reach the new altitude.”

“Aye sir. “

Sen. Martin McKenzie of California was in the guest lounge located on deck three talking with a few of his aides. His tie was loose around his collar and somewhere he had lost the dark blue suit jacket that wore when he came on board. In his hand was drink of some kind, probably a martini which he was known to be fond of. He seemed to be in a good mood and in the middle of telling the small group a dirty joke. That is until he noticed Captain Phillips entering the room.

“Captain, how are we doing? I notice that we seem to be gaining altitude?”

“Yes,” Ed replied. “There is some unsettled weather ahead and I thought it would be better to get above it than try to go through it.”

“It won't cause us any problems, right?”

“No sir. It shouldn't.” Edward shook his head. “ I just came down to make sure you and your people were settled in alright.”

“Captain, it is only for what? A couple of days? I am sure we have no complaints here. Right boys?” the senator glanced around the room at his aides. He was met with a mixed chorus of “No's” and “Not me's.”.

“Captain,” his wrist com said. It was Rick's voice.

“Yeah, go for the captain.” he said after pressing the button.

“I am sorry to disturb you sir, but can you return to the bridge please?”

Something felt off in Rick's voice. Looking out the window that feeling only got worse.

“I am on my way” he responded. Turning to the senator he said, “I am glad your all settled. Please let me know if I or anyone on my crew can help you with anything. Looks like they need me on the bridge.”

“Will do Captain. Thank you for the lift.”

When he entered the bridge, the Engineering team was hard at work at the Engineering Station with what apparently was an emergency situation. Rick was with them and he wasn't in a good mood. There was a red light indicators blinking on several instrument panels both there and at the Navigation and Ops Stations.

“Sit-rep?”

“It's bad captain. It seems that we can't control our ascent. No matter what we do we continue to increase our altitude.” Rick said. “I have Casey and her team on there way up to physically check on the valves but until then we are already at 40,000 ft and increasing.”

Ed looked at the instrument readings. How could this be? There are back-up after back-ups for these systems. Problems like this do not happen. “Could it be a problem with the software?” he asked.

“I doubt it sir. Todd is looking into that as we speak.”

“Good. Keep on it.” He took his seat and turned to his left hand monitor. It displayed all of the ships systems with the troubled areas highlighted in red. He hoped that somehow he might find the problem and it's solution. He wasn't too worried that the huge gas cells filled with helium would explode. The material they were made from could withstand almost unlimited pressures, and if need be, the valves could be opened manually. They would loose some of the precious gas, but that was preferable to having the entire ship destroyed. He also wasn't worried that there was much danger to the crew because the hull was pressurized, just like the commercial jets that people flew on all the time. There was enough oxygen on board to last for a few weeks if needed. No. His concern is that they might reach an altitude where the air became so thin that they might not be able operate the elevation planes. The *Invictus* could then be in real trouble.

“We've defiantly been sabotaged captain.” Lt. Casey Redmond said over the wrist com. “It looks like they welded the valves. Only that doesn't make sense, sir. There are over ninety of these valves that run the length of the ship. No one could have done this in the few hours since the last time the valves were engaged. All of my guys report finding the same thing on every one of them.”

“Lieutenant, get started on your repairs immediately. Keep me informed.” Ed closed the com circuit. He turned to Rick and said, “Commander you know what this means.”

“Yes sir. It means that we may have a saboteur on board.” He met his captain's gaze. Both men knew that there was a possibility of even more sabotage.